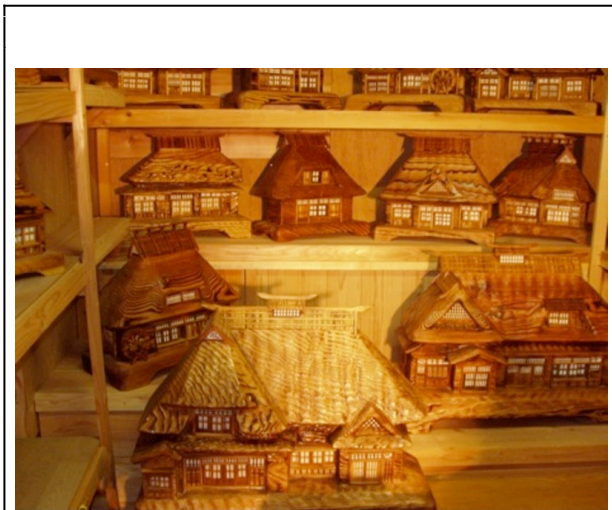


# Hidden Behind Tokyo: Japan's Rural Periphery 東京の蔭に 日本 の周辺点在する農村

**John Mock**



**Local craft making models of traditional homes**

This article extends the reader's gaze beyond the Metropolitan Core (Tokyo-Osaka) that dominates the English language literature on Japan. It is important to understand rural, small town and smaller city Japan because most Japanese do not live in the Core and most of the land area of the Japanese archipelago lies outside the boundaries of Japan's urbanized confines. There is a very different dynamic in rural and small town Japan where there has been a dramatic level of depopulation and aging and economic stagnation. In contrast, the metropolitan core is still growing, and looks prosperous and modern even after two decades of economic stagnation. To bring out distinctive features of the "other" Japan, the one hidden

behind the metropolitan core, consider changes in land use, demography, the rural and small town economy, transportation, communications and architecture. The relative neglect of this topic is striking because regional Japan is both idealized as a repository of "traditions" and values while also denigrated as backward. The declining "other" has been subjected to extensive government policy interventions, but as I argue here, these frequently have been misguided. Significantly, the "other" Japan remains an important arena of identity politics in a nation that has experienced massive socio-economic convulsions in the post-World War Two era.

## Population Distribution

Looking at Japan in very broad terms, the metropolitan corridor stretches from Kanto to Kansai or Tokyo/Saitama/Chiba to Osaka/Kobe. Both ends are massive metropolitan sprawls with multiple civic entities. In the middle is the enormous Nagoya industrial area. However, even riding the Shinkansen (the high speed "bullet train") from Tokyo to Osaka (right through the heart of the conurbation), it is evident that much of the landscape is more sparsely settled as all along the route one sees virtually uninhabited mountainous areas. Outside of this metropolitan corridor, there are few large urban nodes and they are spaced more widely apart. In between are substantial regional cities and between those are a large number of fairly small cities.



**Train station and entire train on narrow gauge railway, Akita**

In terms of scale, metropolitan Tokyo (including Yokohama/Kawasaki) has about 35 million people, a bit less than 25% of the total population of the country. Metropolitan Osaka is home to another 10 million while the Fukuoka and Sapporo metropolitan areas have populations of about 2 million. Sendai, Hiroshima and several other "regional cities" have about one million residents each. The next tier, including many prefectural capital cities, ranges from about 200,000 to 600,000 residents. To be considered a "city" (shi) in Japan, a civic unit must have a minimum of 30,000 people, but there is no density requirement. For example, in the last round of administrative consolidation (*gappei*) in 2005, "cities" like Kita Akita City in central Akita Prefecture, about 400 km north of Tokyo, were formed by consolidating four very sparsely populated townships, themselves the result of an earlier consolidation in 1955. Kita Akita City does have just over the 30,000 population minimum required for city designation, but it is spread out over a land area of 1,152 square kilometers

The light lines in Figure 1 are the pre-consolidation boundaries, the dark lines are the post-consolidation boundaries, and the grey irregular shapes are DID, "Densely Inhabited Districts". The population density is 31.1

people/km<sup>2</sup> compared to more than 14,000 people/km<sup>2</sup> in the central 23 wards of Tokyo 2,627 people/km<sup>2</sup> for the three prefectures (*Itto Sanken*) of the metropolitan area (Japan Statistics Bureau)

Demographers use the term "Densely Inhabited District" rather than city because of precisely this confusion. In this usage, a DID has a population of more than 5,000 residents, but a density of at least 1,000 people/ km<sup>2</sup>. Obviously, Kita Akita City does not come anywhere near this definition since about 92% of its area is forest. All of the population (and all of the connecting roads, farms, fields and everything else) are in the remaining 8%. This is further complicated by the Japanese use of the term *inaka*, often translated into English as "rural" to mean everything outside of the metropolitan core, even very large cities such as Sapporo and Fukuoka, which are clearly not "rural".

Using Akita as an example of one of the less populous prefectures, it is interesting to note that while incomes in Akita are much lower, costs-particularly land costs-are also much lower and dwellings are much larger while household size is bigger than the national average. There is also a higher suicide rate in Akita. Finally, subverting national assumptions about the backwardness of the "other" Japan, the National Achievement Test, in which elementary school fifth graders are compared across the nation, Akita regularly places first.

Statistical Overview, Tokyo, Akita and National Average (Statistics Japan) (The rankings are based on 47 prefectures)

Category	Tokyo	Ranking	Akita	Ranking	National Average
Density: persons/km <sup>2</sup>	5,751	#1	99	#45	343
Unemployment Rate	4.7%	#18	5.7%	#7	5.1%
Living Space/Dwelling (m <sup>2</sup> )	63.94	#47	139	#2	
Commercial Land Cost/m <sup>2</sup>	¥1,551,400	#1	¥39,000	#47	¥156,857

Residential Land Cost/m <sup>2</sup>	¥323,300	#1	¥19,200	#47	¥55,351
Prefectural Income per capita	¥4,851,900	#	¥2,310,600	#42	¥3,068,900
Life Expectancy (male)	79.82	#14	78.22	#46	79.59
Life Expectancy (female)	86.39	#22	85.93	#39	86.35
Suicide (male)/million	26.8	#46	63.46	#1	34.00
Suicide (female)/million	13.17	#19	22.99	#1	12.95
Male Doctors/million men	452.24	#12	384.12	#30	383.70
Female Doctors/million women	158.19	#1	62.67	#38	85.04
Total Physicians/million	303.71	#2	213.63	#34	230.40
Murder/million	0.349	#40	0.416	#38	0.530
National Achievement Test	64.7	#7	69.2	#1	63.1

### Historical Context

By the outbreak of World War II in 1941, Japan's population had surged from 30 million in year 1868 to 70 million with about 21% living in relatively big cities. With the end of the war, roughly eight million Japanese, military and civilian, who were scattered across Japan's Asian Empire, were repatriated. This repatriation was primarily to rural Japan because of the destruction of virtually all major cities by firebombing and lack of food in cities in the immediate postwar. From about 1955, as Japan's surging economy generated jobs in urban areas, many small towns, rural areas and even small cities experienced a declining population, even as the overall Japanese population continued to increase up until 2007.

During the Allied Occupation, the government carried out an agrarian land reform that targeted rural poverty by redistributing land from landlords to previously landless sharecropping cultivators. This reform affected some four and a half million small-scale farm households, catapulting them out of poverty. In this period of pre-mechanized wet rice agriculture, holdings averaged a bit less than two acres, the amount of land a farm family was able to work without additional help. While enormously beneficial, this reform also had the

detrimental effect of promoting very small-scale farming at a cost to productivity and viability.

During the Japanese "miracle" of rapid economic growth during the 1950's and 1960's, young people were pulled into the industrial belts around the major cities along the Tokyo-Nagoya-Osaka metropolitan axis, a massive migration that was exacerbated by national, regional and prefectural policies that promoted urbanization and resulted in concentration of economic activity in these areas. The "pull" from the small cities, towns and rural areas was primarily economic and social. Not only were there relatively well-paid jobs, it was also considered modern and fashionable, even for middle school graduates, to head for the big city. This process, starting in about 1955, drained young people from the fringes and rural heartland of Japan into the big cities.

### Population Context

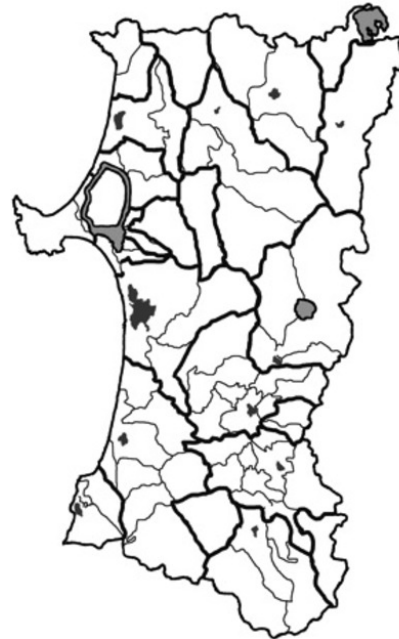
The larger issue here is the population decrease in much of Japan. After peaking in 2007, Japan's population has started declining. The metropolitan center is still continuing to grow but it is clearly a matter of time, given current policies on immigration and a below-replacement birthrate, before the metropolitan centers also begin to decline. Matsutani (2006) argues that this shock will be catastrophic. While some observers have criticized Matsutani's math, if he is even close to being right, there will be substantial difficulties.

"...Japan has reached its population maximum..., and the post-max era will be a time of unprecedented structural change.

That change will be jarringly sudden. The all-too-rapid shrinking and aging of Japan's population will thrust the nation brusquely into that post-max era. Japanese

will need to accommodate the new realities in personal planning, in management strategy, and in public policy. As stunningly swift as the change will seem initially, it will accelerate. The rate of population decline will increase annually. Stopgap solution will prove wholly inadequate. Only systematic social and economic restructuring based on a long-term perspective can position Japan to cope with the post-max era" (Matsutani 2006: 18-19)

Matsutani argues that only local action can be effective. The national ministries will need to cede power to local governments, smaller than prefectures, and help by supplying infrastructure because the complexity of each local environment is such that macro-solutions, variations of one-size-fits-all, will not work. The lack of local knowledge and local resources to deal with local problems will make decision making from the center ineffective.



**Figure 1: Consolidation in Akita Prefecture here.**

Much of Japan has already started depopulating. In Akita Prefecture, for example, population peaked in 1955 and has been declining, if unevenly, ever since. While many local communities have made adjustments, on the whole it has been a slide away from economic growth with an increasingly aged population putting ever greater stress on social services.

While this is not unique to Japan, it is certainly more of a problem in Japan than in other countries, such as Spain and Italy, with very low birth rates because of strict limits on immigration. Although the US also has a relatively low fertility rate, higher levels of immigration continue to drive population expansion. Korea has a similar situation to Japan, but immigration may be increasing

there. Despite much discussion of increased immigration to Japan, there appears to be little popular or political support for the idea.

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Japan

In his introduction Japanese society, Yoshio Sugimoto points out that while Americans and many other outsiders have an image of the "average" Japanese worker as being a young to middle aged man who is a permanent life-time employee of a large company, the "real" average Japanese worker is a middle aged woman working as a part-time employee in a small company (2010:1). Likewise, many outsiders (and not a few "insiders") think of Japan as a terribly crowded urban metropolis, essentially equating downtown Tokyo with "Japan". Such urban chauvinism is not unique to Japan (e.g., the New Yorker's view of the USA featuring the Manhattan skyline against the backdrop of a flat and generally undifferentiated landscape), but is everywhere misleading.

The fact is that most Japanese, about 60%, live in smaller cities, small towns and the truly rural countryside. Indeed, most of Japan, probably about 80% of the land area is fairly sparsely populated—a far cry from the ubiquitous image of crowded Tokyo commuter trains.

## Non-Metropolitan Japan

As indicated, in much of Japan, the overwhelming majority of areas are both losing population and rapidly aging. (See Figures 2, 3 & 4 with Akita as an example of non-metropolitan Japan). The overall population of the country is decreasing with a birthrate far below replacement rate and minimal in migration. Due to net urban migration, the less densely populated spaces are losing population while the more densely populated areas are gaining population. Further, rural out migration involves mostly younger people, leaving behind higher concentrations of older

people in the less populated areas. For a variety of reasons, including changing agricultural practices and governmental policies, the economies of non-metropolitan Japan are quite weak and prospects for substantial improvement are limited.

There are nevertheless major differences among the various parts of non-metropolitan Japan. The Japanese archipelago, a collection of more than 30,000 islands, mostly volcanic and tectonically active, has an enormous range of geographical and environmental characteristics.

Obviously, in a short essay, it is impossible to examine these variations in detail, but it is useful to explore some general themes and see how specific areas fit into wider patterns.

Much of Japan, by area and population, is outside of the DIDs (Densely Inhabited Districts). As noted above, non-metropolitan Japan is depopulating and aging the most rapidly (see Figure 4). There are several reasons for this such as stagnation and declining prospects in agriculture, fisheries and forestry; rise of educational levels; governmental policies at various levels that pull young people into cities; job opportunities, and: widespread perceptions that rural life is "uncool" endlessly reinforced in the mass media.

## Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry: Agriculture

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**Stream showing copper mining pollution long after the industry died in Akita.**

These three areas come under the rather tight control of the central government ministry, currently called the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF). At the end of World War II and up to the beginning of the 1970's, Japanese agriculture was still largely unmechanized. Part of this had to do with technical difficulties, adapting tractors, for example, to work in wet rice fields and coming up with a mechanical means for transplanting rice seedlings. In the 1970's, tractors suitable for "rototilling" wet rice fields and "walk behind" mechanical translators, capable of planting two rows at a time, many of them owned by cooperatives, were introduced.

Over the next two decades, up until the 1990's, the technology improved with modern "riding" rice transplanters capable of planting 4 - 6 rows at once, small combines that can harvest in dried rice fields (still fairly soft ground) using caterpillar treads (the early versions bagging the rice, later versions can transfer directly into trucks without bagging) and other innovations like laser devices for making rice fields perfectly flat (necessary for even flooding). Further, with increasing incomes gained from non-agricultural employment, farmers were more likely to own their own

tractors, transplanters and drying machines.

The result of these innovations was to massively increase the capital outlay needed to engage in rice farming and, at the same time, substantially decrease the amount of labor needed. This declining need for labor along with the decrease in rice subsidies, led family members to seek non-agricultural employment, often in the cities. The peak need for labor, during planting and harvesting seasons, can be met by non-agriculturally employed family members taking a few days off in the spring and again in the fall.

The countryside, therefore, looks very different than it used to; particularly in the mountainous areas (approximately 75% of Japan has a slope of 15° or more). Where Japan had a "groomed" look in the early 1950's, the *satoyama* ("village mountain") look that evokes nostalgia among the elderly, the current situation is quite different. In the past, relatively dense, if small, hamlets were clustered in the valleys with the habitations very close to each other, surrounded by rice fields and some dry fields interspersed with fruit trees. The inhabitants intensively worked not only the fields; they also utilized the surrounding area, called the *satoyama* (里山 literally "hamlet mountain", or "village mountain"). Wood for fuel and building purposes was taken from the forests. Grassland was maintained by frequent burning to prevent the succession of brush and trees. The grass was cut and used as fertilizer in the rice fields. Even further away, *sansai* (山菜 "mountain vegetables") were gathered to supplement the diet.



**Bankrupt rural shop**

The current habitation pattern is quite different. First, there are far fewer people and the people who remain are quite a bit older, in many cases with limited physical activity. Second, the pattern of agriculture has changed. Whereas in the past, hillsides were burned and the grass cut and brought to the rice fields as fertilizer, now chemical fertilizer is widely used, often purchased at the local JA (Farm Cooperative). Similarly, firewood (or locally made charcoal) is no longer the primary fuel. Kerosene can also be ordered from the JA. Thus, the forest has returned (or been replanted, see below) and the open spaces and commons have not been maintained.

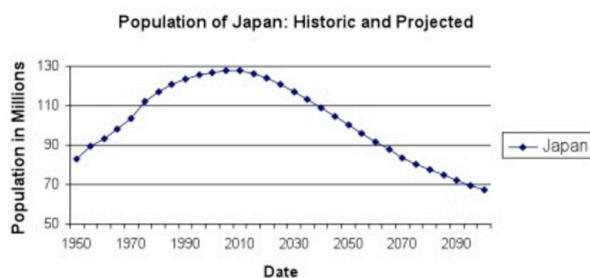
Third, with improved transportation, particularly better road networks and the acquisition by farmers of their own trucks, commercial fruit farming has expanded. Fourth, while *sansai* are still prized and the gathering of *sansai* is done with great enthusiasm in much of mountainous Japan, and sold at a huge mark up at fancy supermarkets and department stores in Tokyo, the vegetable material gathered is no longer an essential part of the diet, but rather is considered to be "good for health" and a dietary supplement in a more affluent society. Gathering *sansai* has gone from being an important part of the subsistence

diet to a foraging "hobby" with the exception of "professional" *sansai* collectors.

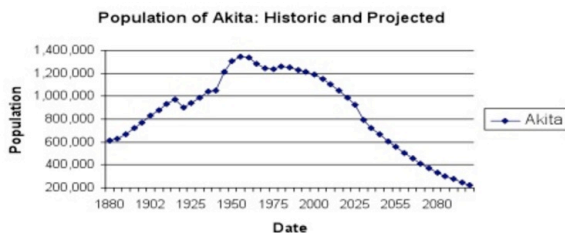
The net result is that land use is far less extensive than it was in the past. This means that more than 90% of the area of some townships has no human habitation. Much of this has been reforested, mainly with *sugi* (Japanese cedar) something of a rural revenge on city-dwellers as great plumes of cedar pollen (*kafun*) are swept into the lowland urban areas, causing widespread pollen fever. In less mountainous areas, there are empty fields and in much of rural Japan, empty houses are common. In what was Ani machi, now part of Kita Akita City, the percentage of abandoned houses doubled, from 6% to 13%, between 1996 and 2005.

In the non-mountainous areas, those that have not been overwhelmed by urban sprawl, the situation is somewhat similar, but less extreme. There are, however, empty fields and in many towns, even in the flatlands, a lot of empty houses. The economics and demographics of agriculture are such that it simply is not sustainable in its current form. Japan grows more rice than it consumes. Therefore, the government has reduced the amount of land allocated to rice by limiting subsidies, but there is still usually a surplus. In addition, as part of international trade agreements, Japan purchases some rice from other countries, most of which is used for industrial purposes or given away to poorer countries as food aid. The net result is that the tiny farms simply do not produce sufficient income to support a family. Overwhelmingly, Japan's farms are run on a part-time basis with most farming households depending on other sources of income. Future prospects look bleak as the average age of farmers has crept into the late 60's and there are very few young farmers. Farming is not "cool" and it is very difficult to make it a full-time sustainable occupation or to find a wife. With a declining and aging population, there is a strong incentive for consolidation of small

plots, but uncultivated fields tend not be put on the market because it is viewed as an unfilial to sell off of the patrimony. Agricultural philosopher Osamu Soda holds that Japan has a special sense of place or "ba" that is closely related to a sense of proper living (2006: 7) and that selling land would separate one from one's "place". Thus, even if a young person wants to be a farmer, and has sufficient capital to purchase land, it is extremely difficult to acquire large, economically viable plots of land.



**Figure 2: Population of Japan**



**Figure 3: Population of Akita**

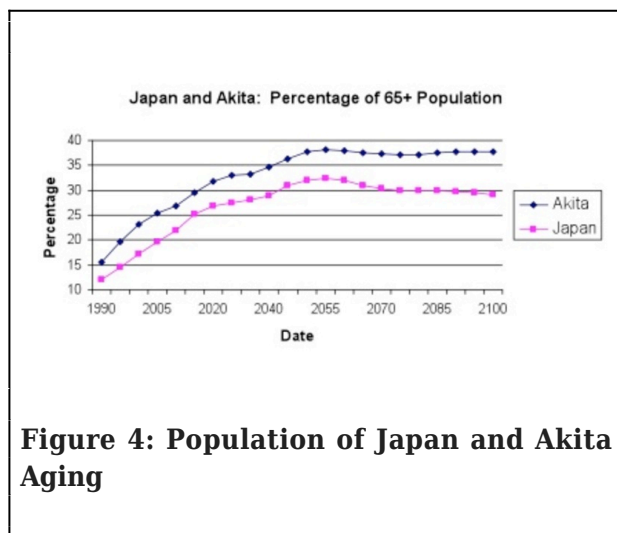
Lilliputian plots prevent productivity increases that could enhance the competitiveness of Japanese farming in the face of increasing international pressures to open the agricultural market. This is partly a legacy of the Occupation-era land reform and partly the policy failures of MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) and the stifling influence of JA. Land reform tied successive generations of (mainly) oldest sons

to farms that have become economically non-viable. Combined with the very conservative nature of MAFF, changes in agricultural practices—one might almost say even elementary rationalization of agriculture—became, and remain, essentially impossible. The result is the current situation with massive overproduction of rice that is too expensive to be sold on the world market, underproduction of fruits and vegetables, and the inability of the country to grow anything like enough food to feed itself. Food self sufficiency is about 40%. A huge literature in Japanese elucidates these problems in detail. For example, Tabayashi et al. (2009) present a massive region-by-region analysis of the sustainability of Japanese agriculture. Essentially, they show that the current mode of agriculture is not sustainable and that adaptation to the modern globalized world is obviously necessary, but they also stress the importance of maintaining cultural continuity with the past.

However, there are reasons to doubt that increasing farm size without other massive changes is a viable solution (cf. Wood's 2012 study of the relatively large farms in the reclaimed area of Hachirogata in Akita). First of all, the topography of Japan effectively prevents much in the way of mega-farms like those on the plains of North America. Second, while some increase in scale might prove useful, several other factors may be even more critical. One would be liquidity of the land market. As mentioned above, unused fields are not usually put on the market. The tax system is such that land taxes are extremely low for "agricultural" land and therefore simply holding on, even for generations, is practical. For young Japanese who do not inherit a farm, it is extremely difficult to get together funding not only for land and equipment. There does seem to a shift to something of a farming business enterprise model—rather than an owner/operator model—but further development in this direction will require substantial policy, legal and social changes. Finally, as discussed



below, farming is simply not considered cool. It is, in fact, routinely denigrated by the mass media and there is little attempt, by the government or anyone else except for the JA (the farmers cooperative) to promote agriculture. Young men who do continue to try to manage their inherited farms have considerable difficulty finding wives, to the extent that many townships and other civic units sponsor a sort of "omiai", a "meet and greet" for prospective brides from the Philippines, Thailand and elsewhere.



**Figure 4: Population of Japan and Akita Aging**

### Fisheries

The fisheries industry is critical for coastal Japan. As with agriculture, in the early postwar years, fisheries and aquaculture were largely not mechanized, but the processes of mechanization had already begun. Also like the agricultural sector, fisheries and aquaculture participants were largely locked into cooperatives and held under the firm hand of MAFF, ensuring that the fishing industry essentially became less and less economically viable. The maintenance of tiny, unsustainable ports and the lack of consolidation of ports or processing plants undermined the economic viability of the industry although aquaculture seems to be much more sustainable than fisheries. The depletion of fish stocks through over fishing continues and threatens the future

of local fisheries. Conservation measures have achieved some marginal successes such as the re-establishment of *hatahata*, a coastal fish, in Akita, but this is a rare exception.

Many coastal communities are poor because fisheries income is insufficient and there has been limited success with diversification. It is these communities that face the risk of extinction and thus they have been eager to attract any business that can reverse their declining fortunes. As Aldrich (2008) points out, the nuclear power industry has targeted such vulnerable communities by offering inducements to host nuclear reactors. Such hosting communities were reassured that the reactors posed no risk, but now the 150,000 people displaced by the three meltdowns and hydrogen explosions at Fukushima better understand the risks. As do the prefecture's farmers and fishermen who lost their livelihoods because nobody wants to eat what they are selling due to radioactive contamination of a large swath of land and ocean around the damaged power plants.

### Forestry

Forestry is the area suffering the most from misguided MAFF policies. During World War II, Japan deforested its mountains (and those of Korea) in an effort to sustain the war effort. In the post World War II period, labor was very inexpensive and the decision was made to clear the remnants of the mixed hardwood and conifer forests and replant with *cryptomeria* (*sugi*, "Japanese cedar"). *Sugi* is a tree that is a fairly good building material, particularly for relatively small structures like individual houses. It is fairly soft and very easily worked, aromatic and aesthetically very pleasing. It also grows quickly, reaching maturity in only a few decades. It naturally grows in bottom land, in the damp soil in valleys, not up on hillsides. However, the decision to plant *sugi* on hillsides as well resulted in an enormous number of monoculture *sugi* plantations where the

relatively fragile trees are subject to high winds resulting in considerable damage. *Sugi* cultivation also requires substantial labor to trim the lower branches that allow it to grow straight.

In the postwar period, this made some sense because of the urgent need for reforestation, but as the decades have passed, serious consequences have included the near total destruction of the forestry industry. To just run through the difficulties quickly, first, *sugi* needs substantial labor to produce good building timber. While immediate postwar labor was inexpensive, labor in Japan for several decades has been among the most expensive in the world. It is now sometimes cheaper to ship in building materials from North America and even Scandinavia than to use domestic *sugi*.



**House entrance in winter . . . a common appearance in Akita and throughout the snow country.**

In addition, very few young people are willing to accept forestry-related employment. It is not easy work.

Second, there are ecological difficulties with *sugi* plantations replacing native hardwoods and conifers. *Sugi* does not produce food for

animals (like oak or beech which produce nuts) although it does provide cover and nesting areas. Thus the variety of animals and plants living in the Japanese mountains, once numerous, has been greatly reduced and there has been a marked increase in conflict between humans and bears (although that conflict has a number of other related causes). In addition, *sugi* is not self-regenerating in areas like hillsides. In the past, the *zokibayashi*, the mixed hardwood forest, would usually regrow after cutting with new shoots growing out of the cut trunks. In fact, this "coppicing" technique produces more wood than individual trees, but is not usually employed with *sugi*. What would be optimal would be a mixed hardwood coppice forest.

Third, *sugi* produces enormous amounts of pollen every spring and many people suffer from allergic reactions to *sugi* pollen. Finally, given mountain villages of largely elderly inhabitants, there is a real danger of villages being overshadowed and eventually swallowed by the *sugi* plantations (Knight, 2006). Poor placement of *sugi* has, perhaps, increased the likelihood of human-bear conflicts because the *sugi* are often very near habitation, giving bears cover to approach food sources like apple and persimmon trees planted near houses. There is nothing in the *sugi* stands for bears to eat, preferred food sources being oak and beech nuts, but the *sugi* can provide "passageway" to human-provided foods.

Several decades ago MAFF could have started to replace *sugi* with a mix of native hardwoods and conifers, taking into account the red pine blight that has been a major problem in Japanese forests. However, no such program was undertaken. The official philosophy of MAFF is preservation of resources and production of food and building material. However, many observers argue that as a very large and intrusive national bureaucracy, the primary motivation appears to be the preservation and expansion of the "territory"

under its control (Cf. Mulgan 2000, 2005 and 2006). The national ministries seem unable to adapt well, are primarily interested in maintaining their own power and find little value in actually dealing with the major problems that confront them or that are a consequence of their own misguided policies. This reflects a structural inability to initiate reform, a path dependency that allows problems to fester. Thus, like agriculture and fisheries, forestry seems set in its ways with an aging population, no successors, and no economically viable product. Meanwhile severe ecological consequences ensue.

### Education

Another major shift has been a huge overall increase in levels of formal education. In the early 1950's, a middle school diploma (6 years of elementary school, three years of middle school) was sufficient for many to leave school and move into the work force. However, today nearly 99% of youth graduate from some form of high school and there is considerable hand wringing about a high school diploma being insufficient for stable employment. Currently about half of high school graduates go on to two or four year universities while the remaining half get some other form of post-secondary education such as training programs or *semmon gakko* ("specialty" schools).

This shift in the level of formal educational levels has two major effects. First, almost all high schools are located in DIDs meaning students living far away from the DIDs must either endure a very long daily commute or move to attend high school.



**Figure 5A: High School and DID Distribution in Akita, Black squares are high schools.**

Taking Akita as an example, almost all of the high schools (the small black squares) are in the DIDs (the red irregular shapes). The few high schools not in DIDs are low-level agricultural or commercial high schools. This tilt toward DIDs is further evident in the concentration of tertiary educational institutions, including all of the high status universities, in large cities or the Metropolitan center. Thus the placement of high schools and tertiary institutions literally pulls young people out of rural areas and into the cities.

Both at the national and the prefectural level, government sponsored ventures, like innovative startup venture capital companies, are concentrated either in the metropolitan center or in prefectural capital cities. Even if young

people want to live in the countryside, it is very difficult for them to use their education in an appropriate way. There is also a clear implication that "smart" people go to cities, while the more unfortunate stay in the countryside.

It is also important to understand that in rural areas, the previously vibrant local towns are dying. The shopping streets in many fairly large towns have experienced prolonged hard times and many shops are closed, creating what has become known as *shutta-gai*, stretches of downtown commercial districts where the shutters of shop fronts are permanently closed. With the deterioration of the agricultural base of the countryside, the movement of secondary industries into regional cities, the metropolitan core or abroad, and the concentration of newer "information industries" (sometimes called quaternary industries) almost completely into the metropolitan core, the "urban" function of towns and small cities has disappeared. The result is a concomitant loss of population and all the problems of a fundamentally depressed economy. Scenic areas and hot spring areas can rely on tourism, but for most of rural Japan the collapse is profound and irreversible.

### Public Works

The mainstay of central government support for rural Japan is embodied in the *doken kokka* (construction state) entailing massive spending on public works some of which may be marginally useful, while others are pure pork barrel and some are environmentally harmful. This is basically the fiscal steroids of the rural economy, funneling contracts to local construction firms and creating an addiction to public works jobs. This is the reality of "cash and carry" rural politics as local political bosses do their part in promoting this "workfare" and in exchange get the "support" necessary to win elections. In reality large construction companies based in cities secure the major contracts. Some observers also argue that the

*doken kokka* prevents the emergence of sustainable local businesses while others blame it for extensive destruction of the natural environment including covering hillsides and coastlines in concrete, erecting unneeded dams and building roads and bridges to nowhere.

Thus, there is a cycle of government projects ostensibly helping rural areas that are really designed to mobilize votes for the conservative LDP. The relevant bureaucrats, particularly those of the MAFF and Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, are in turn rewarded by a legal form of graft called *amakudari*, the "descent from heaven" where they retire from the bureaucracy and are hired, at high salaries, by the industries they once supervised. This inherent conflict of interest makes the bureaucracy pro-business at the cost of the public interest.

### Being "Cool"

It is difficult to live in Japan and not notice the constant denigration of "country bumpkins" even as the countryside's natural beauty is extolled. The romance of the *furusato* as an artifact of extremely rapid urbanization in the 1950's is celebrated twice a year, at *oshogatsu* ("New Year") and *Obon* (the "Festival of Light" in August) when urbanites jam train stations and highways as they flock to meet relatives, former schoolmates and honor ancestors. Of course, as these are extended holidays, the international airports are also busy as rural ties loosen and affluent travelers may opt for Paris or Bali. The government has flailed away on a variety of *furusato* revival plans, mostly white elephant projects, while local entrepreneurs and officials try to figure out what they can offer that affluent Japanese want; *jibiru* (craft beer) is one of the few success stories. Sustainable businesses and industries remain a hope rather than a reality.

Essentially, the larger the population, the "cooler" a place is. Thus, Tokyo is by far the "coolest" place to live and the constant media

babble insists that this is where smart young people should go for a happening lifestyle. Osaka is almost as cool, and really the only rival to Tokyo. Big "outside" cities like Sapporo, Kitakyushu, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Nagoya and Sendai are not nearly as cool, but way cooler than smaller cities and towns. The cool quotient keeps diminishing in gradients as the towns get smaller, but nothing is less cool than the boondocks even if they may be a pleasant place to live or raise a family because these places exist at the fringes of the mainstream media frame. The hip logic is that only oldest sons who cannot escape, and the really uncool, will remain in rural areas.

Further, not only will those who remain stay uncool, they may also stay unmarried. First sons may enjoy the advantages of primogeniture, but remain more encumbered by filial obligations and in rural areas they are increasingly marrying non-Japanese women, mainly from the Philippines, but also from Taiwan, China and Thailand. In Akita, the largest "foreign" minority is Chinese men who work in various industries on a short-term basis. However, the second largest "foreign" minority are Filipinas who have married into Akita families. The situation in Nagano Prefecture, documented by Faier (2009) seems to follow almost exactly the same pattern. This is a product of the fact that young Japanese women are looking to escape the burdens of "traditional" life and the limited opportunities and financial penalties that come with it.



**Figure 5-B: High school and DID distribution in Akita, Irregular grey areas are DIDs.**

### Aesthetics

Even though Japanese architects win many international prizes, much of Japan suffers from a deterioration of architectural quality and the lack of preservation of traditional habitation. Much of non-metropolitan Japan is becoming a rather unattractive sprawl of shopping centers, semi-pre-fabricated homes and tacky business fronts, many of them tied to the metropolitan center. The Bulgarian architect, Milena Markova writes:

As a result of lack of policies on preservation and the strong drive of local residents to become 'modern' by abandoning the traditional style of housing (often

trying to catch up with industrialized urban Japan and avoid at all costs the risk of being called 'backwards', 'bound to the past' or 'old-fashioned', the (rural) townscape today is a chaotic agglomeration of uninspiring buildings within a picturesque natural landscape, presenting a serious challenge to any revitalization measures. (Mock and Markova 2006: 35-36)

While there is much to lament about rural depopulation and the decaying, but lasting scars inflicted on the countryside by the *doken kokka*, "mall-ification" and abandoned human habitat, there is an environmental upside. Ecosystem recovery will not be a re-creation of what existed before, but it may be environmentally healthier and aesthetically superior to what existed at the demographic peak.

### The Future

Peter Matanle and Anthony Rausch (2011), with the Shrinking Regions Research Group, have done a massive study of regional Japan and categorize efforts toward the future in terms of various combinations of redevelopment, repopulation, recovery and reinvention. The approach taken thus far, at all levels of government, has mainly focused on redevelopment and repopulation. These initiatives have been largely unsuccessful. To the extent that there has been success it is almost always based on listening to, and empowering, local people and communities. Local knowledge and local initiative with regional and even national support, has-in isolated cases-led to recovery. Following this model, rather than the current centralized model, is a more likely path to success, they conclude, drawing on European comparisons (Matanle and Rausch 2011: 39 - 82).

Matanle and Rausch argue that "Regional Japan" is an incredibly complex and rich set of areas and that these different areas need to be examined and acted upon according to their individual needs and resources, not with some sort of "one size fits all" solution. They have four specific suggestions: 1) While tourism may be successful in some areas, in most areas local industrial development is needed; 2) municipal governments and other "players" in regional Japan should look to develop professional brand-creation and brand-management capacity "with the aim of extracting added value from their inherent cultural and natural assets" (Matanle and Rausch 2011:432); 3) significant immigration is unlikely so regional planning should assume very much reduced populations, and; 4) there is a need for more research into potential positive outcomes of shrinkage especially involving reductions of human pressure on the environment.

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