



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cities

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cities

The development of urban shrinkage discourse and policy response in Japan

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 June 2016

Accepted 21 February 2017

Available online xxxx

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1. Introduction

It has recently become apparent that “shrinking city” is a worldwide ongoing phenomenon, and Japan is no exception. As the framing article has shown, the features of urban shrinkage are interwoven with the social, cultural, political and economic conditions and history of each country. Those characteristics also affect the framing of each country's discourse relating to the “shrinking city” proposition. In Japan, a country with a strong central government where national policy tends to dominate local policy, and where a single strong political party has controlled the Diet for most of the years since World War II, shrinking city discourse and policy tend to differ from that in Germany and the United States despite considerable similarity in the reality of shrinkage.

This paper aims to examine how Japanese shrinking cities and the reality of population shrinkage have been interpreted and identified in the academic and public discourse, and how those interpretations have been transferred to policy or vice versa, providing a framework for the comparative discussion of discourse and policy in Japan, Germany and United States that appears in the following article.

The central research questions we explore are as follows: (1) How did the discourse interpret and identify the reality of population shrinkage? (2) What kind of terminology has been used to address the phenomenon and how did terminology change over time? (3) What landmark events raised people's interest in urban shrinkage? (4) How did the discourse and policy formulation affect each other?

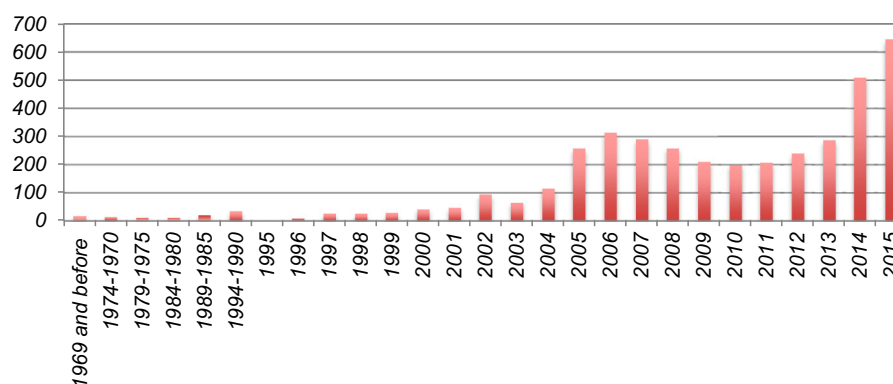
In order to answer these questions, the authors began by surveying the database of Japanese academic papers (CiNii)¹ that included the words “population shrinkage” in the abstract. Then, the authors interpreted the findings from the survey by conducting literature reviews including newspaper articles. This information serves as the starting point for our examination of the relationship between discourse and policy regarding urban shrinkage.

2. “Population shrinkage” and “urban shrinkage” in the literature

We counted the number of academic papers in the CiNii database using “population shrinkage” in the abstract (Fig. 1). The aim of the investigation was to understand what kinds of keyword were associated with “population shrinkage”, especially to understand its relationship to or lack of relationship to “urban shrinkage”. Fig. 1 shows that the overall “population shrinkage” discourse began to heat up after 2005, reached an initial peak in 2006, declined from 2007 to 2011, and then has reversed to increase sharply since 2011. This graph indicates that “population shrinkage” has become a major recent theme for academics; however, it should be noted that there have always been some academic papers published long before 2000 regarding “population shrinkage”.

¹ CiNii (Scholarly and Academic Information Navigator) is a bibliographic database service for material in Japanese academic libraries, especially focusing on Japanese works and English works published in Japan. The database was founded in April 2005 and is maintained by the National Institute of Informatics. The service searches from within the databases maintained by the NII itself [NII Electronic Library Service (NII-ELS) and Citation Database for Japanese Publications (CJP)], as well as the databases provided by the National Diet Library of Japan, institutional repositories, and other organizations.

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(Source: CiNii, edited by the authors)

Fig. 1. The number of academic papers that possessed "population shrinkage" in the abstract.
Source: CiNii, edited by the authors.

We then extracted nine keywords that we consider relevant to the urban shrinkage discourse both with respect to the sheer number of papers and their importance and relevance to shrinkage policy. They are "Urban and Shrinkage", "Vacant House", "Urban and Aging", "Urban and Population Shrinkage", "Pension Problem", "Urban and Low Fertility Rate", "Kaso Problem", "Urban and Disappearing", and "Urban and Declining Center" (refer Fig. 2). From Fig. 2, one can see that the focus of scholarly discourse changed from the "Kaso Problem"² in 1970s to "Aging Issues" from 1980s to 1990s, then "Declining Urban Center" around 2000 to "Pension Problem" which peaked in 2004, then "Low Fertility Rate" in late 2000s. Only in the late 2000s did discussion of "Urban Shrinking" and "Population Shrinkage in Urban Issues" become common. However, it is the "Vacant House" topic that has emerged most notably in the urban shrinking discourses after 2011.

As will be discussed in the rest of the paper, the investigation into the literature, as well as our more detailed survey of literature and policy as they do or do not reflect the reality of changing population dynamics, suggest that the past 50 years of discourse and policy can be summarized as being divided into four distinct phases: (1) sporadic discussion of shrinkage during the 1960s; (2) subordination of the urban shrinkage issue to other topics from the 1970s until the end of the 1990s; (3) emergence of shrinkage in the urban planning discourse; and (4) the publication of "Masuda Report" and the sudden rise of intense anxiety over urban shrinkage in the most recent period.

As will be explained later, shrinkage of certain regions had already begun in 60s, and words to characterize these regions had been created. However, after giving some attention to these shrinking regions, the discussion of shrinkage became relatively dormant focusing instead on related, but subordinated topics such as aging and pension problems. From mid-2000, shrinkage as a major theme in the urban planning discourse began to emerge, influenced by the bankruptcy of Yubari municipality in 2007 and the publication of 2010 national census data showing population loss for the first time since World War II.

Still, the discourse tended to be limited to relatively small academic circles until recently, when Hiroya Masuda, former governor of Iwate Prefecture, published "Vanishing Region (Chihou Shoumetsu)" in 2014, which attracted national attention and became an instant best seller. The key milestones with respect to discourse and policy, as well as key demographic data, are shown in the timeline in Fig. 3. The balance of this paper will explore how these discourses have emerged

and shifted over the past 50 years, and how they have affected the policies that were adopted.

3. Urban shrinkage in Japan

Urban growth and development only became the norm after the end of Japan's closed-door policy, the economic isolation that took place from the 17th to the middle of the 19th century. During the 200 years of the Edo era (1639 to 1854), the era of seclusion, the population grew by only 0.07% per year. Japanese cities began to grow after the 1868 Meiji Restoration. With the exception of a few years during World War II, the population has increased steadily, growing from 34 million in 1868 to nearly 128 million in 2004, an annual growth rate of 2.03% (See Fig. 4). Since then, the population has begun to decline, and many cities have begun to lose population. According to the 2010 national census, 76% of all Japanese municipalities lost population from 2005 to 2010.

There are no truly booming cities in Japan currently; Japan has no equivalent to Hamburg or Munich in Germany, or Phoenix, Portland or, Houston in the United States. Even growing regions such as Tokyo and Nagoya are projected to lose population in the near future. However, shrinking areas are unevenly distributed. From a national perspective, smaller cities in more remote regions; and from a regional perspective, suburban areas, are losing the most population (Hattori, 2015). Recent declines in suburban populations have occurred even in the Tokyo area (Miura, 2012).

4. Phase 1: the Kaso question and the sporadic discussion of shrinkage in the 1960s

Until the turn of the century, the discourse in Japan was not about shrinkage but overpopulation.³ In 1974, the government issued a white paper on population, which explicitly stated, "Overpopulation is one of the largest problems that the country faces".⁴ Although the relationship to the white paper is presumably coincidental, the total fertility rate of Japan began to drop sharply at that point, falling below 2.9 in 1975 for the first time since the World War II. This drop became one of the key reasons for the decline in the Japanese population.

As Fig. 2 shows, urban shrinkage as such was not an issue in Japan until quite recently. However, some shrinking villages or ephemeral industrial towns had already appeared in the 1960s. Hashima, better known as Gunkan-jima (Warship Island), a coal-mining island that had a peak population of 5000 in 1960 was deserted in 1974. Yubetsu

² Although not a literal translation, Kaso has been characterized as meaning, "severely depopulating" or "excessively under populated" areas, referring to a community "that has difficulty maintaining socio-economic life due to a sudden and large decrease of population". (Imai (1968) "Nihon no Kasochitai (The Japanese Kaso Areas), Iwnami-shinsho, p.9).

³ Kito (2011), "2100 Nen, Jinko 3bun no ichi no Nihon", Media Factory Shinsho, pp.34–35.

⁴ Ministry of Health and Welfare (1974), "White paper on Population (Kousei hakusho)", Ohkurasho-Insatsukyoku, p.13.

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