



# Periurbanization as the institutionalization of place: The case of Japan



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## ABSTRACT

This contribution suggests that the process of periurbanization should be understood as a contingent and dynamic process of institutionalization of place, and that a key focus of research should be on the institution-transformative and generative aspects of periurbanization processes, and the factors that shape them. These processes take place at a moment of institutional openness, when existing land uses and institutions are displaced, and during which actors of all sorts compete over space and the establishment of new institutions, infrastructures and power relationships. I argue for comparative study of both the institutions that structure processes of land-use change and land development in the periurbs, and the spatially differentiated institutional landscapes that are created during processes of periurbanization. I suggest that we see periurbanization not merely as land development, but as a place-making and institution-building process, during which dense matrices of new institutions are established, often with enduring impacts. This overlay of new institutional structures onto existing places is highly variable in different places, and produces contingent sets of opportunities and sometimes highly unequal distributions of the costs and benefits of periurbanization that have long-term consequences for the future urbanity that develops. The case of Japan is presented as an example of one way in which an evolving set of institutions shaped periurbanization through the period of modernization and of rapid urban industrial growth.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last decade we have heard again and again that we have reached a fundamental turning point in human history with more than half of global population now living in cities. Clearly, the transition of population and economic activity to cities is indicative of profound changes in human society, and fifty per cent is a convenient point at which to take notice.

But just as significant is the associated growth of urban area. During the next 40 years world urban population is projected to increase from 3.63 billion in 2011 to 6.25 billion by 2050, a 72% increase (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Urbanization Prospects, 2011 Revision, 2012 Table 1). Yet urban area has long been growing faster than population because average urban densities are declining in many cities (Hack, 2000; Angel 2012: 169). Although we cannot know precisely how large the area will be, there is no question that enormous land areas will be converted to urban uses during the coming decades. Much of this activity will take place in periurban areas outside major cities in Asia.

Periurban areas and periurbanization have been defined in a range of ways in recent literature, and this diversity of approaches reflects both the difficulties of capturing these fast-moving processes, and the wide diversity of experience in different settings, but there is some shared ground. First, the periurban zone is commonly defined as the area

between existing cities and the rural hinterland that is seeing land-use changes associated with proximity to the city, primarily conversion from rural to urban uses (Allen, 2003; Simon, 2008; Friedmann, 2011; Webster, 2011). As McGee (McGee, 1991; McGee & Robinson, 1995) argued, in Asia these areas are often extensive, as cities are commonly located within high-density rural areas that are experiencing rapid economic change and increased engagement in the urban economy.

Second, most recent accounts are process oriented, focusing on the incremental transformation of extensive areas outside cities due to increasing linkages with urban economic activity (Simon, 2008). Webster (2011: 362) reaffirms the validity of his 2002 definition “a process in which rural areas located on the outskirts of established cities become more urban in character, in physical, economic, and social terms, often in piecemeal fashion”. Friedmann (2011: 426) combines the area and process approaches, and concisely defines the periurban as a zone of “encounter, conflict, and transformation surrounding large cities” and suggests that fundamentally, periurbanization is a process of ‘becoming urban’.

A primary focus of existing literature on processes of periurbanization in Asia has been on the huge environmental challenges associated with the rapid growth of cities into rural areas (Simon, 2008; Friedmann, 2011; Webster, 2011). These arise in part because noxious facilities including cement plants, meat processing and rendering plants, solid waste management facilities and waste incinerators are routinely relocated out of urban areas to nearby peri-urban zones to avoid environmental regulations and neighbors’ complaints, or to access cheaper or larger tracts of land. Periurban areas host extraction

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for urban markets of water, lumber, sand and gravel. Urbanization directly generates a range of environmental challenges, including the loss of productive farmland, informal developments that create compromised living environments, solid and toxic waste disposal sites, and poorly serviced land developments that dump human wastes unprocessed into nearby lakes, rivers, and coasts (Swyngedouw, Kaika, & Esteban, 2002; Parkinson & Tayler, 2003; Davis, 2004; Pieterse, 2008; Angel, 2012).

The periurban area has long been the area where noxious occupations and land-uses such as tanneries and renderers outlawed in the city could locate, where the poor could build on the fringes of garbage dumps or other waste ground, and marginal enterprises could operate unregulated. An extensive literature has examined the enduring morphological legacies of periurban land development described as fringe-belts. Conzen and Whitehand showed through town-plan analysis that processes of periurban land development commonly generate patterns of urban form that can be detected even centuries later (Conzen & Whitehand, 1981; Whitehand, 1988).

The main contribution of this paper is the suggestion that more important than urban form, with sometimes equally enduring outcomes, is the process of institutionalization of new urban space that is fundamental to the conversion of land to urban uses in areas outside existing cities. Drawing on theories of new institutionalism outlined in Section 3, the paper suggests that periurbanization can be understood as a kind of spatial critical juncture of institution formation occurring in space and over time. Institutions are defined following Hall and Taylor as “formal or informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity or political economy” (Hall and Taylor 1996: 938). As discussed below, such institutions are power-distributive, and power is exerted in 2 forms: power to shape the overarching rules shaping periurbanization processes, and power to influence outcomes on the ground in specific places. These usually involve different sets of actors, but it is worth asking how the two levels are related.

I argue that alongside a focus on land-use and economic change, periurbanization should be understood as a powerfully institution-generative process, which is transformative of existing social, political and economic institutions, and through which dense matrices of new institutional structures and relationships are created. These processes of institutionalization occur at multiple scales and dimensions, but central to all these is land – as property, as life space, as economic space, and as place. Periurbanization is a process of institutionalization that restructures space and everyday life, and greater attention should be paid to both the sets of institutions that structure periurbanization, and to those that are newly established during these processes. In this sense, this approach seeks to further investigate the deeper meanings of the processes that Friedmann (2011) describes as ‘becoming urban.’

Rural places have their own institutions and governance structures for environmental management, land and property rights, and maintenance of infrastructures and commons, often generated and maintained over long periods (Ostrom, 1990). Because of higher density, cities require different institutions of property, infrastructure, and governance of shared spaces. Becoming urban is in this view a process of transformation in which rural institutions of environmental management, land use and property ownership, and infrastructure are replaced or overlaid with new ones.

Crucially, the new urban space that is created during any particular period tends to bear the long-run imprint of the property and regulatory institutions that exist at the moment of creation of new property parcels or rights. The imprint of urban institutionalization is registered not only in the patterns of public and private land parcels, which endure as morphology, but is also embedded in title deeds, and the specific bundles of property rights associated with the parcels created, which are diverse and are similarly enduring. Even if later redeveloped, urban space is always structured by earlier property specifications, and through its spatial embeddedness in larger patterns.

My suggestion is that the conditions under which this transformation takes place, the choices made, and the actors involved will always have profound long-term consequences for the urbanity that is produced, and that outcomes vary greatly. Yet there has been little systematic investigation of periurbanization as institution-producing process, about the differences in the types and patterns of institutions that emerge in different cases, or about the differentiated landscapes of urban land, infrastructure, and governance that are created.

Periurbanization processes create specific landscapes of property, infrastructure, and regulation in different times and places. These include both formal and informal, legal and extra-legal processes within a spectrum of property rights and claims that are produced. Informal and extra-legal property claims often exist as powerful facts on the ground, and frequently are regularized and formalized over time (Roy, 2005; Benjamin, 2006; Holston, 2008). Whether formal property rights and title deeds are created or not, newly urbanized land seldom returns to rural uses, but tends towards ever more complex urban institutionalization over time.

The suggestion is therefore that we understand periurbanization as a process of institutionalization of space, and see periurban areas as places of institutional openness, between the eclipse of one spatial/institutional order and the establishment of another. Spatial critical junctures create moments of opportunity for the creation of new institutions and patterns and conflicts between competing actors and approaches. From this perspective, ‘becoming urban’ is a transformative and catalytic process in which dense matrices of new institutional spatial fabric are created.

While the patterns produced clearly change over time, the particular ways in which these processes occur in different places, the patterns of property created, the infrastructures created, and the governance systems that are established are profoundly interlinked, and have long-lasting consequences: for the distribution of property ownership, for the affordability of housing, for local health outcomes, for the qualities of the places produced, for democratic urban governance, and the broader capacity to manage what Castells (1977) described as collective consumption.

Part 2 presents the case of Japan as one example of the ways in which an evolving set of institutions shaped periurbanization through the period of modernization and the period of rapid industrial urban growth. Part 3 develops a conceptual framework for understanding the multiple dimensions of institutional transformation in periurbanizing areas. A brief summary draws together the main conclusions.

## 2. The case of Japan

This section outlines the key institutional structures that shaped processes of ‘becoming urban’ in Japan during the 20th century, and the creation of urban property, urban forms, urban infrastructure, and local governance institutions, and notes some major outcomes. Japan is an interesting case of one way in which an evolving set of institutions shaped periurbanization through the period of modernization and rapid urban growth. Although it shares important characteristics with many other East Asian countries, including Desakota patterns of extended metropolitan growth into high-density paddy plains surrounding rapidly growing cities, and largely unregulated periurban development in a context of rapid economic growth (McGee, 1991; McGee & Robinson, 1995), Japan demonstrates many distinctive features, and the urban transition and periurban expansion occurred earlier and is now complete, with Japan now seeing widespread processes of population decline and urban shrinkage.

This case study focuses on three main factors that structured processes of urban institutionalization. First is the land system, and changing land ownership patterns and property rights, including strong constitutional protection of property rights, land taxes, and two major periods of land reform in the modern period. Second are governance institutions, particularly Japan’s remarkably stable geography of local governance units and the enduring power of the central government

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