
MEGALOPOLISES AND RURAL PERIPHERIES

Shrinking Cities in Japan

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Japanese society is essentially a vital urban society in which it is not really possible to envisage the problem of “shrinking cities”—at least not yet. Even during Japan’s twelve-year recession, from which the country is only now beginning to recover, the cities seem too dynamic for that. Despite the fact that the economic situation has been precarious for so long, or perhaps precisely for that reason, the construction boom has continued unabated not only in the rural peripheries but in the large cities themselves. On the one hand, this seems surprising; on the other, it is understandable. The Japanese construction lobby, which is headed by powerful players within the system of the so-called Iron Triangle (the interplay of ministerial bureaucracy, politics, and business), have been able to push the expenditures on economic stimulus programs—that is, deficit spending—to dangerous levels on all geographic scales (national, regional, and local) and thus still guarantee the profit potential for the Triangle members through cartel-like bidder agreements (*dangô*) in their own interest. (1)

Today’s Japan gives the impression that its planning for urban and regional development, energy, and transport is still based on predictions of growth. It is indisputable, however, that, following decades of continuous increase, Japan’s population has now peaked at 127.8 million inhabitants and that, after a period of stagnation, it will decline to about 100 million inhabitants by 2050, a decrease of 22% (based on the mean estimate). In Germany, the population shrinkage estimated for the same period, 82.5 million to 75 million (mean estimate), is relatively mild at just 9%. The total fertility rate, for which a value of circa 2.1 is necessary to ensure population stability, has fallen in Japan from 2.23 (1967) to 1.28 (2004), on the lowest end of the world scale, even below the rate of Germany (1.34). Unlike Central Europe, however, the population losses in Japan cannot currently be mitigated by immigration. Japan’s self-image as an ethnically and socially homogeneous country and the psychological barriers to foreign infiltration are very high, so that its immigration laws are correspondingly restrictive.

The problems are made worse by the fact that Japanese society is aging more rapidly than that of any other country in the world (life expectancy is 85 for women and 78 for men). In 2004, the percentage of people over 64 was already 19.3% (in Germany, it was 16.4% in 2000); the figure predicted for 2050 is 36% (in Germany, 31%). The “shrinking of the population” is a topical theme in Japan that could potentially exceed the drama of the scenarios in Germany. In the peripheral rural areas of Japan the problems that will face the whole country in the long term are already a reality: dramatic declines in population, the extreme aging of society, and problems
