

論文 Article

Japanese Rural Population Decline: The Importance of Perspective

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Abstract:

Extensive research has been conducted on the impacts of rural depopulation in Japan at municipal, prefectural, and national levels, but only a minority of studies have sought to examine and explain the causes of depopulation at the sub-municipal level, despite the fact that research at the village-level is essential to properly understanding the factors contributing to rural decline. This study reveals how healthy overall-growth at municipal levels can serve to disguise decline at village-levels, and the manner in which many traditional agrarian communities are being lost to urban expansionism. The latter being especially true of smaller communities existing on the outskirts of larger, urbanized areas.

Introduction:

For several decades now, it has been commonly acknowledged that one of the most pressing issues facing Japan is the state of the nation's wildly imbalanced population demographics. Japan, like many other industrialized nations, has seen the forces of modernization compel population to cluster in a small number of heavily populated urban centers, to the detriment of its rural areas. This population shift can largely be attributed to a phenomenon that took form in the immediate aftermath of the Asia-Pacific War, popularly known as Japan's 'rural exodus.' The rural exodus was a period of intensive economic and industrial regrowth centered around the nation's destroyed urban centers, which attracted agrarian youth to the cities in droves. From 1955-1965, some 60% of the newly created positions in industrial labor would be filled by rural migrants, the majority of whom were younger than nineteen (Kitano, 2009, 17). Their youth would ensure a high degree of adaptability to the new labor shift, and that the impact of their absence from the family homestead, or *furusato*, would not be immediately apparent.

The long-term negative implications of the exodus would only become apparent when the majority of village leavers failed to return to their rural homesteads in order to succeed their aging parents and fulfill the role of *atotsugi*. The prosperity being enjoyed by major metropolitan areas had coincided with a significant downturn of rural industry, such that rural life had lost much of its appeal for young, economically minded individuals. The late 60s and 70s saw a significant ebb in the rural lumber industry, as oil took over as the nation's primary source of fuel, while around the same time, Japan began to scale back on rice production, with

the government actually encouraging farmers to produce less rice in response to previous overproduction. The 2005 National Census revealed that the rural mainstay industries of agriculture, fisheries, and forestry were responsible for employing a mere 4.8% of individuals employed by major occupational categories, which is a decline from 19.2% in 1970, only thirty-five years prior. As such, agrarian youth who had created new lives for themselves in urban centers have long had the additional excuse of a significant recession of rural employment influencing their decision to stay in the cities.

The Kaso-Mondai Phenomenon:

In the absence of in-migration, and as generations of older rural-dwellers begin to die off, the present-day situation is such that many rural communities are experiencing total abandonment, while others will only survive as long as their youngest residents do. In a matter of decades the rural and urban demographic distribution of Japan had inexorably shifted. In 1960, 36.8% of Japan's total population resided in farm households, while by 1994 that number had dropped as low as 10.3% (Muligan, 1997, 877). Nearly an entire generation of young people had permanently abandoned the rural scene, disrupting established patterns of primogeniture, which in turn destroyed the "demographic viability" of countless rural communities (Irving, 1999, 159). Even households with children do not have a guaranteed future in the rural scene. As far back as 1993, 56.1% of commercial farm households reported having successors, of whom a mere 12.5% were primarily engaged in agricultural employment, while 53.5% were engaged in some agricultural employment, and 34% were engaged in no agricultural employment (Muligan, 1997, 877). The implications of this data are twofold. Firstly, as far back as 1993, nearly half the farming households in Japan had little to no future of succession. Secondly, a vast number of potential successors displayed little intention to carry out their *atotsugi* roles. It can be safely assumed that much of the 34% not engaged in any agricultural work went on to leave the rural scene behind for work opportunities in more urbanized areas, where the majority of non-agricultural work opportunities are to be found. There is also no guarantee that a significant proportion of the 53.5% engaged in some agricultural work did not leave at a later time either. Many of the issues surrounding the problem of failed succession have only become more apparent in the present, as initially the increasing mechanization of farm labor and longer life-spans being experienced by Japanese people delayed the more negative backlashes of the rural exodus. Farming abandonment was typically most observable in communities where mechanized farming remained difficult, but gradually even communities with ideal conditions began to experience decline, with every passing year only served to emphasize one inherent truth: a community cannot survive without a sustainable number of young people (Fukamachi, 2001, 714).

The present day legacy of the postwar rural exodus is the *kaso-chitai*, or severely depopulated area. The Japanese government classifies municipalities experiencing an annual

decline of 2%, or greater, as being kaso communities, or communities undergoing severe depopulation. It was the government, who, at the urging of concerned municipal leaders, sought to address the looming kaso-mondai (depopulation problem) through implementation of the Law for Special Measures for the Alleviation of Problems in Areas of Severe Rural Depopulation in 1970 (Irving, 1999, 159). Under the law, criteria were created for the identification of depopulating areas, and funds were allocated for the improvement of rural infrastructure in places designated as requiring assistance. In 1970 about one-third of all municipalities in Japan were designated as requiring assistance, and this number has only increased into the present (Irving, 1999, p. 159).

The Danger of `Misdiagnosis`:

In the present, the blending of urban and rural communities means that if one were to travel to the suburbs of any large urban center, they would find many towns and villages with strikingly different demographics from each other, typically based on the most paltry differences in location. One town or village may be deemed an acceptable commute to the urban core due to its favorable proximity to a nearby train line, or commuter highway. As such, it could expect to benefit from suburban outgrowth. Land in the suburbs is relatively cheap, which is attractive to young families looking for starter-homes, or people wanting to escape urban overcrowding and live closer to nature. When a community is deemed to be within an acceptable commuting distance, the demand for housing from such individuals has historically been such that preexisting rural housing is insufficient to meet it, and apartments, or entire new towns need to be constructed to meet the demand. As such, many rural communities existing on the urban fringe have transformed from traditional farming villages into suburban new towns, with modern, spacious, western-style homes, and many of the conveniences of urban life close at hand. The occupations of many dwellers has changed as well, as rice paddies make way for apartments, tract housing, shopping malls, and the other trappings of suburbia.

In contrast, communities that are often seemingly a negligible distance away, but deemed to be a more difficult commute, typically feature far smaller populations and far less development. In many cases, they may be experiencing rates of decline, while their more successful neighbors continue to grow. The fascinating thing about the urban fringe is that one can often observe a mixture of these two different kinds of rural communities, often within very close proximity to one another, perhaps even within the same municipality. This is because the borders of many municipalities in the urban fringe extend across areas that can be considered part of the suburbs of the urban center, or nearly so, while other areas remain firmly in the rural scene (Irving, 1997, 33). This is significant, given the fact that many studies of rural depopulation in Japan have been conducted at national and regional levels, while the majority of studies have elected to settle on analysis based at the municipal level. The danger in this is the previously discussed high degree of demographic variance one can observe in

relatively small areas in Japan. Within a single municipality one can observe areas ranging from quite heavily urbanized suburban tract housing, to very traditional, sparsely-populated, agrarian -style villages. Post-war Japan has undergone several periods of nation-wide municipal mergers, under the *shichōson gappei* (cities, towns, and villages merger) policy. The merger policy is intended to ease administration over these areas, but does little to account for the population dynamics of the communities they pair together. Thus, the notion that one can observe fairly homogenous levels of growth and development within the same municipality would now often prove fatally flawed. Despite being considered two different disciplines, it is not uncommon to witness urban expansion and rural decline within a single municipal area, highlighting the need for research at the sub-municipal level.

A Picture of Success?:

Naturally, the stigma of being a *kaso*-community, or being a municipality without demographic viability, is a classification that communities strive to avoid, given that such a label clashes with the image of success and prosperity that most municipalities strive to portray in order to attract in-migration, tourism, commercial development, and the other accoutrements of success that allow successful towns to continue to grow and survive. This fact is noted because municipalities with good demographics at the municipal level are capable of portraying an overall pattern of growth and success, which serve to disguise population decline at sub-municipal levels. This fact is not highlighted as an indictment of such places, but as further proof that a proper understanding of the factors leading to rural decline necessitates investigation at the sub-municipal level.

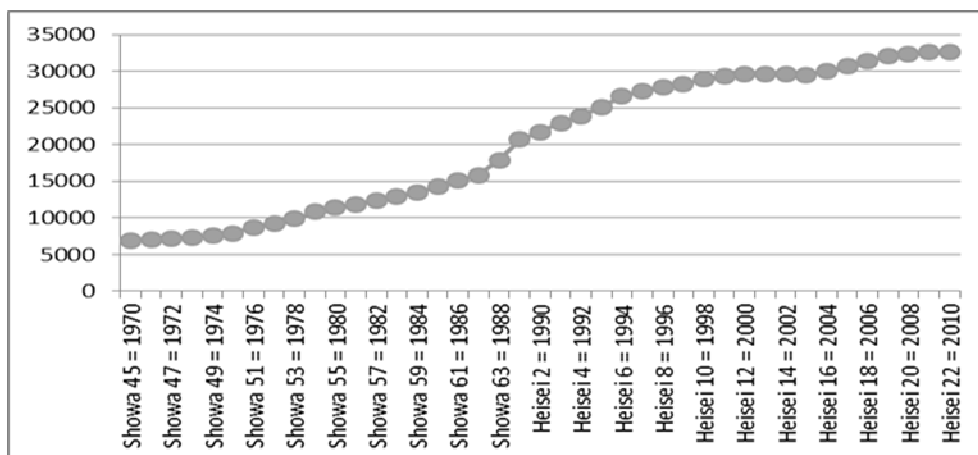
Inagawa-chō is a municipality of 32, 562 individuals, located in Kawabe District in the southern portion of the easternmost corner of Hyōgo Prefecture. As a community, it is a seemingly unexceptional mixture of small, traditional agricultural villages and newer suburban developments. The influence of the regions topography is evident in the way in which Inagawa's villages are organized, with the town's center and brunt of the population clustered to the municipality's southwest, where the valley system is at its broadest and flattest. Agriculture in the southern portion of the town has largely given way to tract-style housing for the town's urban commuters, who constitute a vast majority of the total municipal population. The three major suburban developments, or 'New Towns,' as they are known, were built in close proximity to Nissei Chuo station, which allows passengers to commute into the larger urban center of Osaka in a mere seventeen minutes.

Further north, the situation is vastly different, as the valley bottlenecks significantly, and elevation increases rapidly, resulting in this half of the municipality being far more sparsely populated and isolated. The districts main highway follows the same pattern as the valley system, entering the south of the municipality from Kawanishi city and proceeding along the valley floor, before exiting from the north of the municipality into Sasayama city. Inagawa's

forty-five villages are typically built along this highway, with a few exceptions, with the more out-of-the-way villages typically featuring population decline proportionate to their level of isolation. The municipality's apparent lone distinctive feature may be the fact that it remains one of the few communities maintaining official town status in the area, despite being surrounded by cities, and its rather advantageous location within the keihanshin region (Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe metropolitan area), Japan's second most heavily urban populated region. In spite of all these factors, Inagawa has somehow staved-off the fate of gappei (town merger), which has seen so many of its neighboring towns merged together to form cities.

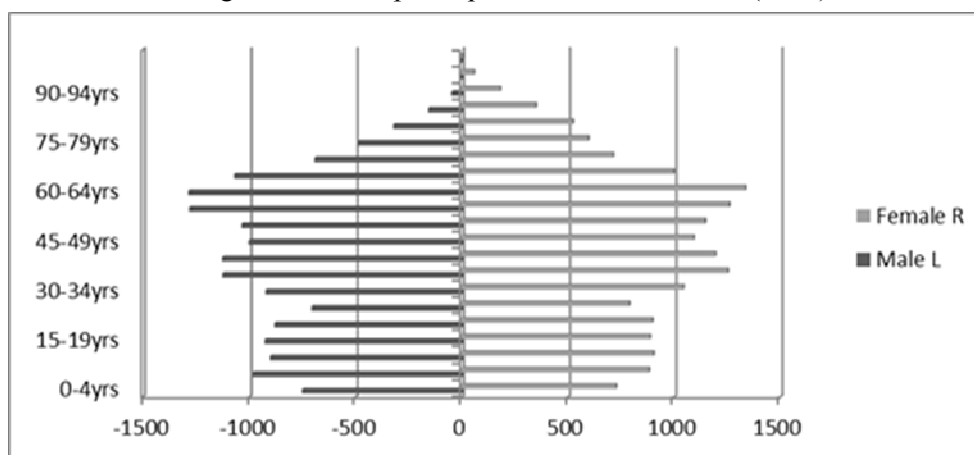
As alluded to, Inagawa-chō is a municipality where an overall pattern of healthy growth serves to disguise sub-municipal population decline. From 1970 to 2010, a small town flourished to a community of 32,381, in a span of forty years. Figure 1 illustrates this pattern of growth, with municipal growth represented on the y-axis and the corresponding year represented on the x-axis. Observing figure 1, the evident pattern of prevailing healthy growth may seem surprising when one considers the fact that the beginning of the data period neatly coincides with Japan's rural exodus, when rural flight was at its most prevalent and rural industries suffered several serious setbacks. However, this only strengthens the argument that this forty year time-spine represents a period when Inagawa was beginning to transition from a traditional agrarian community into an increasingly urbanized satellite community for the Keihanshin metropolitan region. While many less fortunate rural municipalities saw an overall pattern of decline, Inagawa saw an overall pattern of growth due to its advantageous location on the urban fringe. An urban fringe which has inched further into rural regions with every passing decade of urban expansionism. Within Inagawa, the period saw the creation of some twelve new villages, many of which would go on to experience highly favorable growth rates, and which now play host to the vast majority of the municipality's population.

Figure 1. Municipal Growth (1970-2010)



Besides featuring an upwardly mobile pattern of growth, population distribution is another indicator used to identify good demographic viability within a given community. When entered into a population pyramid, a community with good demographic viability creates a pyramid-shaped pattern, with the largest number of individuals in younger age categories, with population thinning out at towards the top. A community that might be in trouble would feature a larger ratio of elderly residents to young residents. Looking at figure 2, one can see that the municipality's population is reasonably evenly distributed, with the greatest number of residents falling in the 60-70 years of age range, indicating that population decline can be expected in the next few decades, as generations of older residents die off. At the same time, there seems to be enough young people to assure that Inagawa can successfully absorb this loss.

Figure 2. Municipal Population Distribution in (2010)

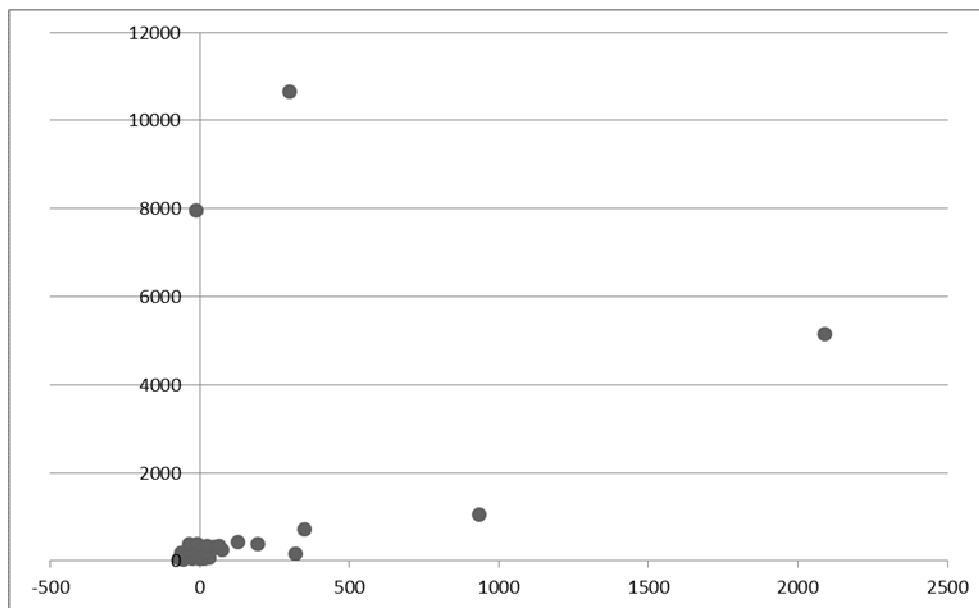


Growth Trends at the Village Level:

Having looked at population demographics at the municipal-level, it has been established that Inagawa is a town undergoing a favorable growth rate, with future demographic viability. However, the real interest of this study is the ways in which favorable growth at municipal levels can serve to disguise depopulation at sub-municipal levels. In cases such as Inagawa, the transformation of a traditional agrarian community into a satellite town for nearby urban centers may obstinately portray an overall picture of success; assuming success is measured by population growth and commercial development examined from the municipal perspective. However, the reality of the said situation, and the danger of such a broad perspective is that this kind of process results in the original character and culture of the community being subsumed and folded into the 'extended metropolis,' while simultaneously, decline within smaller villages in the municipality goes largely unnoticed. Within Inagawa-chō, there are many villages with long histories and rich cultures, but the vast majority of the population no longer lives in such

places. In fact, in 2010 some 73% of the municipal population was distributed amongst three suburban-style new town developments. Considering there are a total number of 45 villages within the entire town, the fact that 73% existed in one of three villages, none of which date further back than 1989, suggest that the town underwent a massive population shift in the last few decades. Figure 3 displays the municipality’s unbalanced population distribution, with population totals in 2010, graphed only the y-axis, against population growth ratios, along the x-axis, for each village. As can be seen, the vast majority of Inagawa’s villages feature low population size and low, if not negative, growth ratios. Meanwhile, the three suburban communities are completely on their own, indicating the demographic situation they feature is completely unrepresentative of the majority of villages in the municipality. However, these three communities contain the lion’s share of the total municipal population, so, any population statistics taken at the municipal level will be representative of their demographic realities. This begs the question: What is the situation in the smaller agrarian villages?

Figure 3. Growth Ratio vs. Population

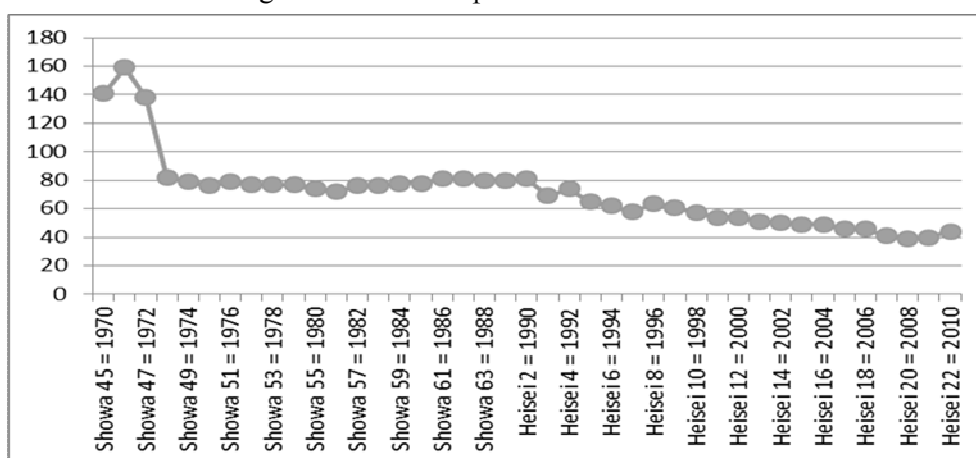


Hidden Decline:

As can be partially gleaned from figure 3, the majority of villages are not experiencing the kind of success that municipal statistics may obstinately imply. Their demographic viability is, on average, completely opposite to that of the larger communities within the municipality, and, as such, can be said to exemplify Inagawa’s disguised depopulation problem. Compare, for instance, the municipal growth rate to that of the small village of Ginzan, Inagawa’s hardest suffering community, with an annual rate of decline of -1.72%, which places it closer to kaso-levels of decline than any other village in the municipality. This downturn is not a recent

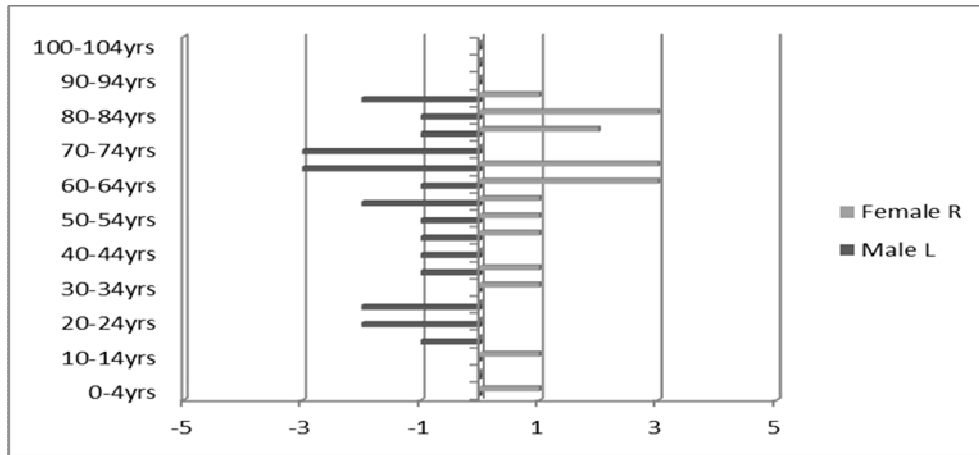
event either, considering population within the village has been tumbling downwards over the last four decades (fig. 4), from 140 in the early 1970's, to a mere forty-four residents by 2010. From the start of the data period, population declined rapidly, aside from a slight spike from 141 residents to 159 between 1970 and 1971. In 1973 the Tada copper mine, located a short distance outside of Ginzan, closed its doors for good. The mine undoubtedly employed a significant portion of the village, as evidenced by the number of residents who left in the wake of its closing. Adding to its misfortunes, Ginzan's worst period of decline occurred at what would have been the tail-end of the rural exodus.

Figure 4. Ginzan-Population Growth in 2010



According to Inagawa's municipal register, some 45.5% of residents were above the age of sixty-five in 2010 (by 2011 this figure has reached 51.35%), which is also apparent when one observes the village's population distribution (fig. 4b). Only three individuals, two females aged one and ten years, and one male, aged sixteen, are below the age of twenty. Surprisingly, twenty to thirty year olds, an age cohort usually associated with village-leavers, consists of four males and zero females. They consisted of one twenty-year-old, one twenty-four year old, and two twenty-six year olds. This is a reversal from the majority of the municipality, where typically village leavers tend to be male, while females are more likely to remain at home. Potentially this reflects the fact that these four males are still engaged in agricultural work, or other kinds of rural industries, which tend to be more male dominated. In any event, the fact that nearly half the population of the village is well into their retirement years does not bode well for the future sustainability of the community. Ten residents are above the age of seventy-five, which would not be a significant number of elderly residents if it were not for the fact that this number represents 22.73% of the village's population. Perhaps even more representative of Ginzan's lack of demographic viability is the fact that in 2010 there were only two children within the whole village.

Figure 4b. Ginzan-Population Distribution (September 2010)



Ginzan’s demographic situation may be more persistently negative than the average traditional village within the municipality, but its situation is representative of the kind of population decline taking place in a majority of Inagawa’s villages. In fact, thirty-three villages have experienced population decline since 1970, or since their date of inception, and many villages, including Ginzan, show patterns of decline that hint at possible kaso-levels of decline in the near future. One point that has been touched upon several times now, but is an important one to recall, is that with 73.1% of the total municipal population living in the new towns, it would be fair to say the municipality is now largely centered around the newer suburban developments. Even population within individual suburban chōme (districts) typically outstrips all but the largest of the traditional agrarian communities. Acknowledging this, and the fact that so many traditional communities are locked in a downward spiral of decline, it seems evident that Inagawa may have already largely lost its traditional identity. The New Town communities, in which the majority of Inagawa’s residents live, are designed with little more than residential development in mind, and few vestiges of Inagawa’s agrarian past have been allowed to exist within them. The ‘towns’ themselves lack all but the most basic of public services, aside from the occasional school and town-park, further emphasizing their role as simply being a place for their residents to sleep in between commutes. However, while the New Town developments may lack the aesthetic cultural and historical qualities of the more traditional agrarian settlements, there is no denying that have been far more successful at attracting and retaining population than those villages hurt by their own isolation, or their inability to adapt to the modern world. This must be the great irony of the situation; that smaller villages that have, for one reason or another, been able to avoid being consumed by the expanding metropolis, are now largely destined to die a slow death as they are bled dry by depopulation. One way or another, it seems that Inagawa’s traditional agrarian character is not long for this world; it is merely a matter of how it will disappear.

Conclusion:

The general conclusion of this study is that Inagawa is a municipality that has already undergone significant demographic transition, from a population that once largely sustained itself through agrarian activity, to one where the majority of successful villages are geared towards urban commuters, in contrast to the minority of the municipal population who still occupy the more traditional, ad-hoc agrarian communities. As such, it is apparent that Inagawa has largely shed its historical character as a rural agrarian town and has evolved into an increasingly urbanized satellite suburban community. It is also apparent, that statistics compiled at municipal levels do not accurately portray the demographic reality of the majority of villages within the town. Inagawa's future survival is assured, but not in its traditional form. Much has been made of the issue of rural flight in Japan, and the formulation of strategies to combat the issue. Within Inagawa, it seems inevitable that the majority of the smaller farming villages not located in a privileged location, or providing incentives for residents to stay, will continue to see decline, and in certain cases, potential abandonment.

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