

ROBERTSON: Population Dynamics in Inagawa

Population Dynamics in Inagawa: A Rural Municipality on the Urban Fringe

Neil Robertson

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. Population statistics from municipal levels and beyond do little to shed light on the reasons certain rural communities are able to attract in-migration and retain population, while others fall victim to decline. This study seeks to reveal how healthy overall-growth at municipal levels can serve to disguise population 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. A commonly repeated premise is that proximity to urban centers and modern conveniences is the principal deciding factor of population distribution and the best predictor of success or failure in the rural scene. To this end, the demographics of nine representative villages within Inagawa, a small town in south-eastern Hyōgo Prefecture, are examined, utilizing data from the municipalities Basic Residential Register, spanning as far back as 1970.

Given the specific nature and small-scale of the area being studied, literature relating directly to Inagawa municipality is sparse. As such, the brunt of this study is reliant upon fieldwork and original analysis of population data published by the Inagawa's town office. There are a total of forty-five separate settlements within the municipality of Inagawa, but for the purpose of this study that number was reduced to eleven settlements, divided into three distinct categories. The first category created for this study is comprised of three communities collectively known as the "New Towns," each grouped together because of their larger than average populations and rates of growth. In fact, nearly 73% of the entire municipal population lives within one of these three "New Towns." Significantly, all three are relatively recent developments within the municipality, located towards the south of the municipality, closest to the urban center of Osaka.

The remaining forty-two settlements were divided into two categories on the basis of their population growth ratios and their population sizes. One such category represents the traditional agrarian communities, or the "Traditional Villages," in the municipality, of which there were found to be thirty-nine. The Traditional Villages comprise a majority of the settlement types within Inagawa, while

still only containing a small minority of the total municipal population. Most of them can trace their history back beyond the start of the data period (1970-present) and the formation of the municipality. Their populations are small, none exceeding five hundred residents, with many featuring populations in the double digits. The majority of these localities have been experiencing decline to low-level growth, with several approaching near kaso (annual population decline of 2% or greater) levels of decline. Given their dominance as the most common settlement-pattern within the municipality, five settlements were selected to represent this category. The third and final category of villages was comprised of a further three settlements, collectively labeled the “Mid-Range Villages,” which are neither so large and recent as to warrant inclusion amongst the New Towns, nor so small and old as to belong with the smaller, less populated agrarian settlements.

Having decided upon which villages were to be examined, and their individual demographic situations, it next became necessary to attempt to explain the reasons behind their individual successes or failures. In the case of the New Town settlements, it was decided that the privileged locations they enjoyed was the main overriding factor explaining the unprecedented success the three settlements had experienced. Traditional Villages, meanwhile, were largely found to be suffering from persistent patterns of population decline due to their unenviable locations within the municipality. However, in at least two cases, it was found that the detractions of remoteness could seemingly be counteracted if a village provided employment opportunities to its residents beyond the sphere of agrarian labor. Employment considerations lead many individuals to leave the rural scene in favor of urban life, but villages that can provide their residents with employment opportunities within the village seem to be able to counteract one of the central appeals of urban life, and are thus more successful at attracting and retaining population.

The general conclusion of this study is that Inagawa is a municipality that has already undergone significant demographic transition. Presently, the vast majority of the population now resides in recently developed planned communities organized into districts, or *chōme*, based along city lines. These localities are obviously geared towards individuals who commute outside of the municipality in order to work in nearby urban centers, in contrast to the minority of the municipal population who still occupy the more 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. As for the future, Inagawa’s 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.