

Depopulating Mega-city and Urban Problems of Metropolitan Fringe:

A Case Study of Iga City, Mie Prefecture, Japan

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In Japan, depopulating trend is now looming from rural towns and villages to cities and even metropolitan areas. While international organizations like the United Nations (2011) still predict that the population of all mega-cities in the world will more or less increase, recent national and regional population prospects conducted by the country (e.g. National Land Development Council, 2011; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2013) and prefectures (e.g. Osaka Prefecture, 2012) in Japan insist on more negative population projection especially for Kansai regions centered by Osaka.

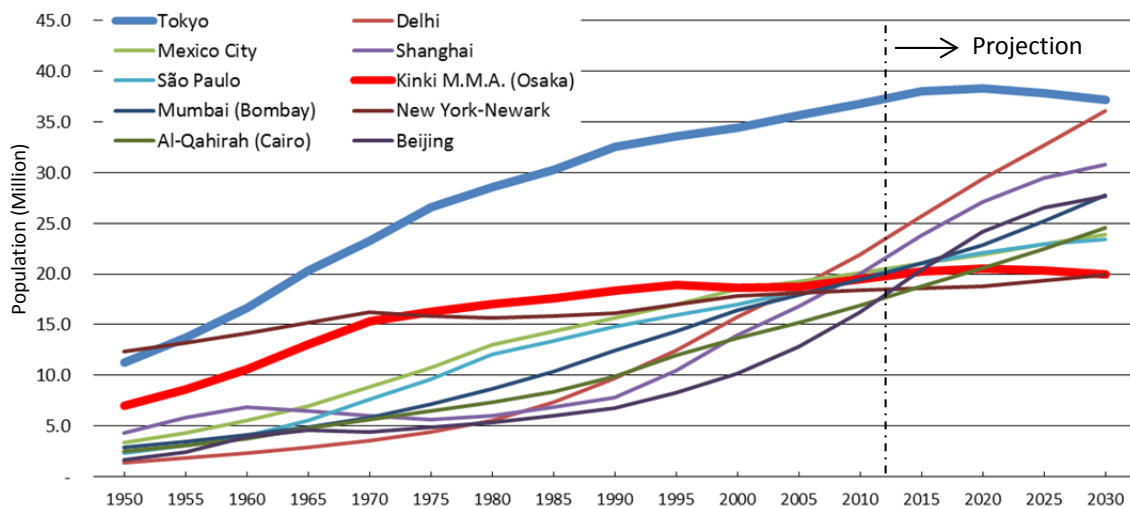


Figure 1. Movement and Projection of Population of the 10 Largest Metropolitan Areas in the World

Source: World Urbanization Prospect, 2014

*note: The definition of "Kinki M.M.A. (Osaka)" is based on the Statistics Bureau of Japan and different from any summation of prefectural population in Kansai (Kinki) region.

Kansai region is the second largest metropolitan area in Japan and the 6th in the world in 2010, according to World Urbanization Prospects (2014). Its population has increased and the metropolitan area has been expanded since the era of modernization and especially during high economic growth periods between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. The trend continued until the end of so-called "bubble economy" at the end of 1980s and until that time many housing and industrial development projects were unboundedly extended to far suburban and peripheral areas of Kansai metropolitan areas in order to search for more reasonable land, houses or condominiums owing to excessive appreciation of land values.

However, after the burst of the bubble economy and following long-term recession, Kansai region starts to shrink both in terms of geographical and economic scale. Land prices are decreasing and people are moving back from far suburban to suburban or outlying areas in the metropolitan region. At the same time, the tendency of mono-centric national economic and

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demographic structure are strengthened in Japan and regional economy of Kansai stagnated more than Tokyo metropolitan area. While Chubu metropolitan region, which is centered by Nagoya and the third largest metropolitan region in Japan, still have robust economic structure supported mainly by automobile and its parts industries, many companies in Kansai region suffered from severer regional economic recession and hollowing out of regional industrial agglomerations. As the result, Kansai metropolitan region will be the first mega-city in the world, whose population will continue to decrease for a long term.

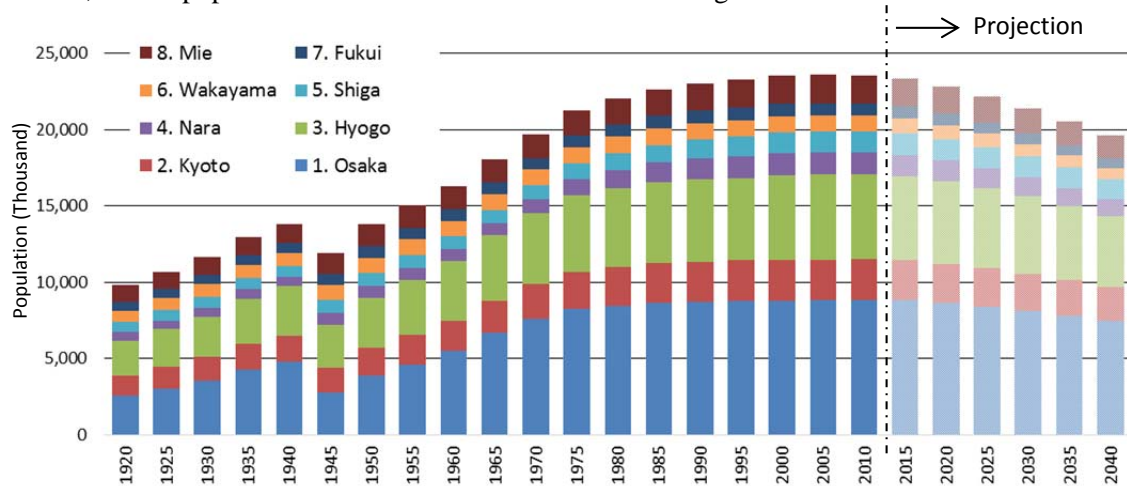


Figure 2. Long-term Movement and Projection of Population of Prefectures Belonging to Kansai (Kinki) Metropolitan Region

Source: National Census, 2010; Projection of National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2013

The paper aims at describing some typical urban problems of metropolitan fringes of a mega-city whose population is decreasing, picking up an example of Iga city, Mie prefecture in Japan. The city is famous as a cradle of *Ninja*, covert agent in feudal Japan, and originally separated by several small rural towns and villages. But in accordance with the extension of Kansai metropolitan areas and development of transportation infrastructures, many industrial and residential development have done and the population continued to increase until the middle of 1990s. But after the long term recession and depopulating trend, the population of the city starts to decrease at an accelerating pace.

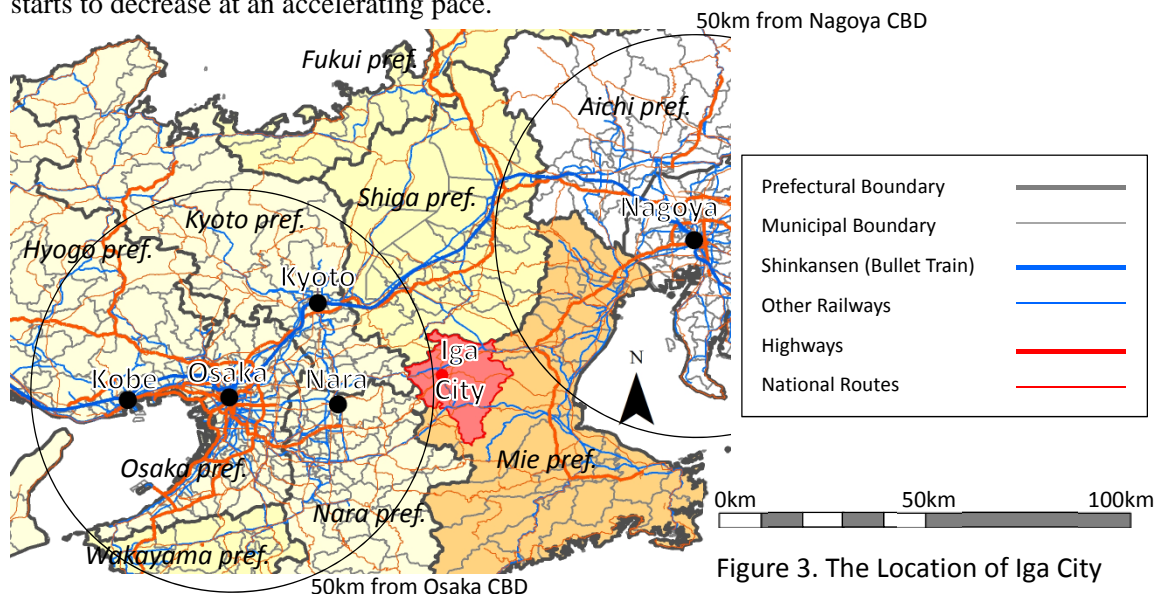


Figure 3. The Location of Iga City

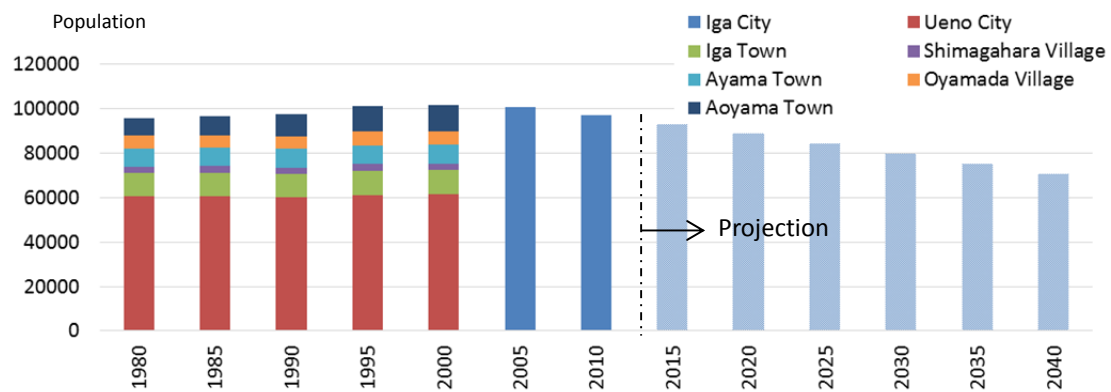


Figure 4. Movement and Projection of Population of Iga City

Source: National Census, 2010; Projection of National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2013

*note: The territory of Iga City consisted formerly of six municipalities as shown above.

Among various urban problems, depopulation and deterioration of suburban housing complexes in the city due to depopulation seems to be serious. There are some complexes whose populations are too small to maintain a neighborhood community to manage the complex and almost no hope for the future because of pessimistic population projection. Public facilities are malfunctioning and even security situation becomes worse. Districts where only elderly people are left are miserable, since most of housing complexes are far from town centers and residents cannot enjoy commercial and public services without car.



Photo 1. (left) A vacant land plot and an abandoned house in a suburban housing complex

Photo 2. (right) Land plots abandoned for a long time

In turn, such problems are also very serious for the local municipality: Iga city, who is obliged to maintain the livelihood of their citizens. Dispersed residential areas causes inefficiency of any kind of public services done by various infrastructures or welfare and education policies. Depopulation and aging also result in financial difficulties and the capacity of the city to serve public service reduce gradually. Iga city starts to consider the reform and restructuring of various public facilities like schools, kindergartens, halls, libraries, sports facilities and welfare facilities especially for elderly.

Problems derived from depopulation, and countermeasures of residents and the city in the metropolitan fringe are worth studying to consider the way of urban planning in the era of shrinking region. Implication extracted by this case study can be applied not only in other cities and towns in Japan, but also those in many Asian countries in the future, most of whose

population predicted to be decreased within a or some decades.

The purpose of the paper is to describe serious phenomenon in Iga city, which are assumed to result from depopulation and to analyze existing responses and countermeasures of Iga municipal government. The influence of both long-term expansion and recent shrinkage of Kansai mega-city on Iga city strongly affects urban phenomenon which have not been seen in rural towns and villages in Japan. Existing studies describing and analyzing phenomenon derived from depopulation in Japan (e.g. Peter Matanle et.al., 2011) are also generally focusing on rural towns and villages and none of them clarify problems and countermeasures of depopulating urban fringe in metropolitan areas.

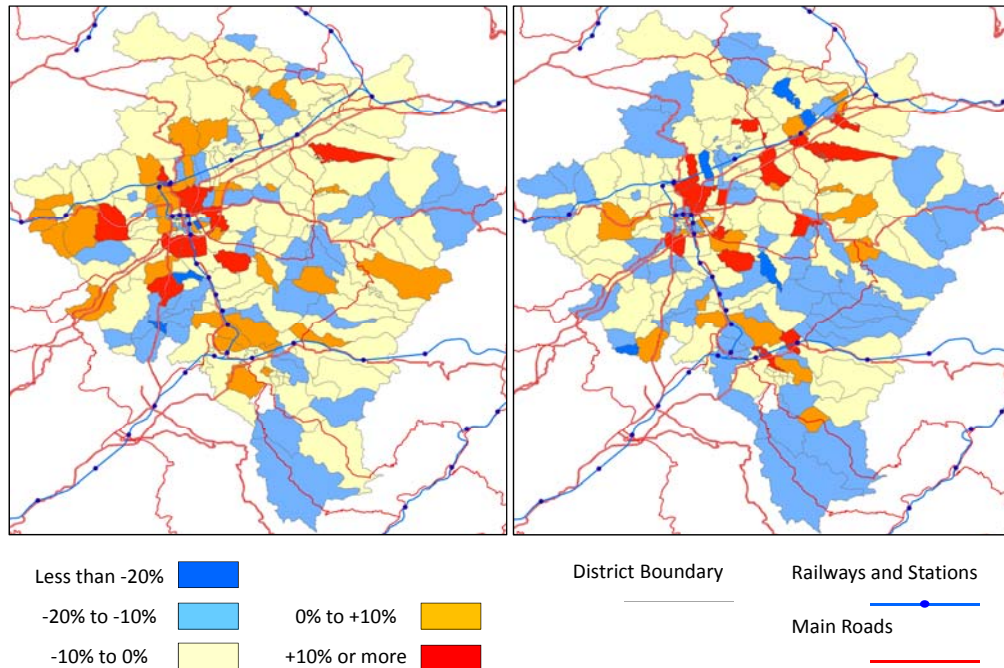


Figure 5. Population Change of the Districts in Iga City (Left: 2000 to 2005, right: 2005 to 2010)

Source: National Census, 2000, 2005, 2010

Keywords: *Depopulation, Mega-city, Metropolitan Fringe, Kansai Region*

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