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Image 1: The author’s apartment complex, Leopalace, Kōchi City. Photo by author.
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Introduction

Japan has been facing a decline in rural population since the end of World War II. According to the World Bank, Japan’s percentage of rural population declined from 36.7% in 1960 to 8.5% in 2017. This is roughly a 28% decrease in the gross percentage of rural population. In comparison the United States in 1960 had a rural population of 30% which declined to 17.9% in 2017. This is roughly a 12% decline, less than half the decrease in rural population the Japanese are facing [The World Bank Group (US), 2018]. This Japanese rural decline has been continuing even with efforts to encourage citizens to move to these rural areas.

Kōchi Prefecture, on the island of Shikoku, has an estimated population of 728,276 as of 2017. In 1995 the population was 816,704 indicating Kōchi Prefecture had a decline in population in the past 22 years. Of the 47 prefectures in Japan only Shimane and Tottori Prefectures are less populated than Kōchi Prefecture (City Population, 2018). One effort to bring people back to rural areas is using the unique cultural identities of regions as a potential driving force for keeping people in the area while also attracting new people to an area.

In Kōchi City, the capital of Kōchi prefecture, there is an annual event that attracts spectators and participants from all over the world, the Yosakoi festival (よさこい祭り). The Yosakoi festival is a relatively new festival, founded in 1954, just nine years after World War II (Lemmon, 2016). As a festival it is non-traditional. Traditional Shinto
festivals (*matsuri*) are events that connect the people to their local deities. *Matsuri* usually are associated with drunken revelry, noise, and packed streets. The Yosakoi festival falls under the category of civic pageants that became popular in the 1950s as a way for local governments to revive cities and attract tourism (Hardacre, 2017). In Kamakura, the Kamakura Carnival was a festival that took place annually where parades would travel to a local beach, the final location in the route, and hold a dance competition (Hein L., 2018). Like Kamakura’s Carnival the Yosakoi festival is not a ceremonial dance festival celebrating the Shinto gods. The Yosakoi festival was created to cheer up the populace after the nation’s crushing military defeat in World War II. Another motivation for founding the festival was a hope to improve the business of the *shōtengai*, a commercial district running along a main street. The Yosakoi festival reflects its more modern roots in the varied music and costumes of the dance teams that wander through Kōchi city on the festival days (Lemmon, 2016).

The Yosakoi festival is so popular that it has been replicated in other regions of Japan. The Saitama Yosakoi and the Harajuku Omotesando Genki Matsuri Super Yosakoi festivals are a few examples of copycats. The festival in Kōchi City attracts a huge influx of tourists from both Japan and around the world.

**Urban Planning**

To investigate the extent to which the Yosakoi festival has contributed to rural revitalization it is important to explore other efforts at rural revitalization. Rural revitalization involves many different approaches to improving rural Japan, some of which are population growth through internal immigration, modernizing economic
structures, and rebuilding community organizations to enhance local/regional pride. This is also connected to a concern involving the steady aging of the population. As of 2016 26.7% of the Japanese population was 65 years or older. Single person households also reached 32.5% with 1/8 of those that live in a single-person household being elderly men and 1/5 elderly women (Yoshida, 2016). Towns are forced to close down schools and other types of community infrastructure that attract young child bearing age couples due to a decline in younger residents. A reduction of traditional youth groups and a loss of healthy able bodied people to do physical work is another consequence of youth no longer living in rural communities. This loss of youth is especially critical in an agricultural area such as Kōchi Prefecture.

One former elementary school in the Shimanto River area of Kōchi, Shimantogakusha (しまんとがくしゃ), was turned into an inn and recreation area. This is just one of the ways people have tried to not let buildings go to waste. However, converting schools in this way makes rural living less attractive for young couples who wish
to one day raise children in an area. Therefore other aspects of rural life are being emphasized to attract young or foreign people to these areas. Rural areas do have “life style” appeal when it comes to attracting those who are looking to get away from the city rush and cramped conditions. Some rural revitalization efforts, as above, do seem contradictory and counter-intuitive.

In order to attract urban people back to the rural parts of Japan’s prefectures there also has been a reexamination of traditional urban planning. Machi-zukuri, a word combining machi (town) and tsukuru (to build) is a newer type of urban planning strategy, which involves giving the community more say and power in planning neighborhoods. Machi-zukuri counters the traditional toshi-keikaku planning style, which is a top down approach involving a rigid hierarchy of people involved in planning the town/city layout (Evans, 2002). Consider the harsh style used in toshi-keikaku planning after disasters: traditionally, the government can temporarily remove residents from property to repair or replace local infrastructure. This approach can break up neighborhoods and force people to move out of an area for financial reasons. Machi-zukuri, meanwhile, is intended to emphasize the importance of keeping people together and allowing citizens to help in the planning process. The downside to this is that it elongates time obligations involved for each construction project whereas the top down approach more efficiently completes construction projects; the upside is greater civic participation that allows people to be motivated by changes to their town and be happy helping city planning officials with projects.
It is clear that *machi-zukuri* is a method that cannot be sustained by itself. One example is Mano, a part of Kobe City rebuilt using the strategy of *machi-zukuri*. In 1995 an earthquake struck Kobe and the surrounding region, devastating the area. In order to rebuild using the more community based urban planning strategy more outside labor and resources were needed. The need for outside professionals in the construction industry and volunteers had to do with some of the construction being done by locals to strengthen their connection to the project and increase approval by allowing locals to participate in the reconstruction they helped plan. After the initial additional resources were added from outside the community in the 1995 reconstruction of Mano, scholars and enthusiasts of *machi-zukuri* began to provide more consistent outside support. These supporters provided external resources to the area in the form of volunteer work forces that supplemented the lack of local expertise in projects after the reconstruction (Evans, 2002).

A mixture of both planning types can be quite successful. In the Kobe case it was not completely a bottom up approach like normal *machi-zukuri*. It involved more negotiation between all parties involved and the creation of good relationships with the citizens living there (Hein C., 2002). Cities in Japan can be a mixture of traditional and modern design, although traditional side streets can be a bit of a disaster in city areas. Smaller streets are hard to navigate by car and were not originally built to conform to disaster codes. However, smaller streets have the advantage of creating more connected neighborhoods and ensuring neighbors can easily access each other and facilitate frequent communal activities. This push and pull between traditional neighborhoods that
optimize space in neighborly communities and following disaster codes is an ongoing debate in Japanese urban planning. Urban planning is one way of distinguishing between neighborhood centric rural towns with traditional values and cramped conditions of city living. Kōchi City lends itself to the more community based strategy inherent in the *machi-zukuri* urban scheme. Many of the city’s neighborhoods consist of well-defined areas that have narrow streets. A more community based model for urban and ex-urban areas in the prefecture would seem to be an attractive alternative to centrally controlled urban planning. This would reflect and mirror the agricultural culture that surrounds the prefecture’s largest city. Kōchi City does not have a direct connection to *machi-zukuri* planning, however, *machi-zukuri* is a topic academically being explored at Kōchi University by Professor Ōtani Eijin. The academic interest in *machi-zukuri* can have an influence on Kōchi City’s planning methods.

**Lifestyle Changes in Rural Villages**

The way neighborhoods are built can shape the lifestyle of residents and can impact the atmosphere of an area. The problem with only focusing on community is that the lifestyle of an area can also impact job opportunities; economics can have a huge impact in shaping the financial wellbeing of residents of an area. Many rural areas have faced a shift away from the agricultural and industrial production that supported many communities.

In mountainous communities the economy in the 1960s was based on rice farming. Lumber and charcoal production were also a part of the mountain economy in many areas. Urban expansion during the 1950s brought a decline in mountain village economies.
because charcoal demands decreased with the growth of oil, gas, and electrical substitutes. Technology also lowered the number of farmers required for farming. Moving to the city became preferable to being jobless in the rural areas (Iguchi, 2007).

Even today, the impact of migration affects these rural areas. Drawing in newer residents requires job opportunities. Cuts to village infrastructure, such as schools, have forced various professionals out of areas; a teacher needs a school to teach. The appeal of moving to the countryside today is more to those with work that can move, such as work that can be done online, and those who own businesses that can be sustained without a huge influx of people. Vacation spots might attract vacationers, but unless they retire they probably will not uproot themselves. Until the stresses of the cities drive people away from cities into rural areas it is unlikely people will leave behind the conveniences of Japanese city life. Statistics show a continued outmigration from Kōchi Prefecture. Although the latest net migration statistics for 2016 and 2017 show a positive in-migration for the prefecture of approximately 8,000 people, previous years since 2004 show a loss of population (Japan Statistics, 2018).

Each prefecture, as well as parts of prefectures, has its own appeal, so not all rural areas have the same message. One prominent difference is food. For example, Kōchi prefecture has sawachi dishes that include a big bowl of a variety of foods. The sawachi is unique to the region and in the past allowed women to also eat with the men and not have to rush to the kitchen on special occasions.

Japanese farm women in rural areas in the 1970s were pushing for changes in their lifestyle. An interesting account of the community life of Japanese rural women is Gail
Bernstein’s *Haruko’s World: A Japanese Farm Woman and Her Community*. The account is focused on the life of a woman named Haruko living in Ehime Prefecture, which borders Kōchi Prefecture to the north. In Haruko’s village there was a commonality among many of the women: they all wanted their children to have an easier life than theirs. They wanted to educate their children, send them to university and, hopefully become something other than a farmer and live in the city. This hope stemmed from the hard manual labor of farming; while rewarding in many ways, creating a good crop or being able to have pride in your fresh home cooked meals could also reduce time dedicated to raising children and had to be supplemented with part-time work so that women had some spending money. This push for city life for children of rural families caused a lack of youth in communities like Haruko’s after a couple of generations. The lack of youth left many alone in their older age, with only occasional visits from their children (Bernstein, 1996). In some cases, such as Haruko’s her children would return to live in the rural community (U-turners), but for some communities the success of raising children for a more prosperous city life has caused the current state of rural population decline.

Another significant concern is the erasure of long held cultural traditions. For example, in a town on the coast of the Seto Inland Sea the traditional carrying of the *mikoshi*, a type of portable shrine carried on the shoulders in festivals, is disappearing. With 60% of the neighborhood being over 60 years old and no longer capable of carrying the heavy *mikoshi* to the main shrine, the *mikoshi* have been modified. Accommodations included adding wheels to pull the *mikoshi* on a cart as opposed to carrying it, placing the *mikoshi* on trucks, or making the *mikoshi* smaller. Some families are bringing children or
young people back to the town for the festival but despite this the 300 year old tradition is dying (Chavez, 2018). Haruko’s generation likely did not think the cultural ties of their areas would be endangered by their genuine hope to improve the prospects of their families. It was an unintended tragedy.

**Prefectural Pride**

Prefectural pride in Japan tends to be linked to food and, in recent years, mascot characters. Mascot characters represent a particular region or prefecture and are associated with many historical or cultural aspects of the area.

The idea behind featuring mascots and unique products of prefectures was to attract more people to lesser known areas to explore foods and cultural interests. Cute depictions of *katsuo*, a type of oceanic fish (bonito) served lightly smoked or seared, line the merchandize shelves in Kōchi city. In my interactions with Japanese students from Kōchi University one of the most important topics of conversation was food and, of course, the daily weather greeting. Daily conversations start with a good morning, afternoon, or night greeting usually followed by a comment on the weather. There is a sense of unspoken pride in local specialty dishes. Signature dishes are cheaper in areas that specialize in
making them, which attracts gourmands to these locations. This sentiment is likely stronger in Kōchi due to its status as a major agricultural center in Japan.

Characters depicting Sakamoto Ryōma also line shelves in Kōchi shops. Sakamoto Ryōma, who was born in Kōchi, was an important figure in the Meiji Restoration which “restored” imperial rule to Japan in 1868. He was also known as the “Father of the Imperial Japanese Navy.” Although he was assassinated in 1867 he remains a prominent figure in Kōchi Prefecture’s historical pride. A cute interpretation was a samurai style Hello Kitty keychain.

**Festivals**

Urban planning, lifestyles of villages, and prefectural pride provide context to the main topic of festivals. Japanese festivals can be very exciting experiences. The Yosakoi festival in Kōchi City I attended was filled with song and dance. Takemasa Eisaku composed the original song and lyrics for the “Yosakoi Melody (Yosakoi Bushi).” In order to keep young people involved in the festival, he encouraged other artists to create their own music and dance creations for the festival. *Naruko*, wooden clappers, are used in the dance choreography for teams. At the time of its creation there were not many forms of entertainment so the festival was something that gave joy and artistic expression to the locals (Kochi’s Summertime Fever: The Yosakoi!, 2017). To this day the locals still put tremendous effort into practicing for the festival so that everyone can have a fun time from August 9th to August 12th.
I spent six weeks in Kōchi City, going about daily life in what was an extremely hot summer, attending classes at Kōchi University. A typical day in the city was busy by local standards during commuting times early in the morning or later in the evening. Even at these times, however it typically was not too crowded, despite being a city of over three hundred thousand. Not packed in like a busy Tokyo commuter train, the local tram was relaxed.

I had the opportunity to participate in the Yosakoi festival. When I asked if I could join a team, the Kōchi University professors and students seemed excited to let me join despite my lack of dance experience. Weeks before the event banners and *naruko* advertising the festival were visible in the shopping district. On the team a few others were also not experienced with festival dancing, but we all wanted to do our best because of the effort our dance leaders put into organizing the team. The festival also got everyone excited regardless of their ability to participate. The night before the official
start of the festival a fireworks display was held. Before the fireworks, the Japanese Air Self Defense Force had a fighter plane display over the city. I saw many people around shops and on the street stopping to watch the fighter jets loop around.

Practicing for the festival started with smaller sub groups, mostly people who would come when they had free time after class and would gather by line number. The line numbers represented the positions in the four long columns of dancers. Numbers one and two were mirrored choreography of the dance learned by three and four. The leaders of the group and the students who taught me and the other less-experienced dancers were very dedicated; they knew the moves by heart and the amount of time they practiced seemed overwhelming to me. I was the only foreign student on the team, so my dance teachers seemed to be happy to try out English words such as left or right despite my knowing the Japanese instructions. They would also count in English

Image 5: The fighter jet display by the JSDF. Photo by the author.

Image 6: All 118 members of the dance team. Courtesy of Rina Takeshima.
when around me. For the bigger practices they would instruct only in Japanese and a few of the students who studied English helped me understand the more complex instructions. The dance was very involved.

Dances were performed in two types of venues. Dance performances are on stages and in street parades. The stage version of the dance was the first version I learned. For this version the dance choreography required us to stay on stage so there was not a constant forward march accompanying our steps. Next came the naruko practice where I learned the places to clap the naruko during the multiphase dance. Finally, we put it all together while walking through the streets in our happi outfits. Happi is a type of traditional coat that has a print on it and in the case of our dance a team crest on the back. The happi my team wore were long sleeved, which made practice hotter and more dehydrating.

In the week leading up to the festival all dance teams on Kōchi University’s campus had practice every day. The huge numbers of students walking through the roads on campus were a marvelous sight. When the two dancing days arrived, I had never seen as many people in Kōchi City during my stay. The trams were filled by dance teams and spectators. Walking from venue to venue I was shocked to see foreigners, because at the university and in the apartments I was only in contact with a handful of United States and
European students. Tourist visits for this one event in Kōchi are absolutely astounding. One of the dancers told me the inn she stayed at was filled. No one could get a hotel room anywhere in Kōchi City.

**Conclusion:**

Japan has identified the depopulation of rural areas as part of a national demographic crisis with economic implications. Four major areas have been examined as possible approaches to revitalizing the rural areas. Changes in urban planning could conserve cultural values through infrastructure which provides a way to attract younger people. By promoting a rural lifestyle along with traditional cultural practices including food, rural areas attempt to attract younger people. Encouraging prefectural pride through the use of modern merchandizing techniques is an attempt to recover fading local histories. Finally, many areas of Japan, including Kōchi Prefecture, have come to the belief that festivals such as the Yosakoi festival provide an important attractor for rural relocation of young people. However, questions remain: does a huge tourist attraction like the Yosakoi Festival have an impact on rural revitalization? Can festivals such as the Yosakoi attract urban Japanese youth to rural areas? Is the Yosakoi festival a reason for students to attend the local Kōchi University? In reality, the festival is very
crowded and may give the wrong impression of the more relaxed rural lifestyle that exists in Kōchi. Most visitors to the festival left shortly after the festival ended. Planes to Tokyo were upgraded to equipment that carried over 400 passengers the day after the festival ended. Perhaps festivals like the Yosakoi serve a good tourist purpose but do not attract young permanent residents. As previously stated on page 7, population statistics seem to indicate that this is the case with Kōchi Prefecture considering the decline in population (Japan Statistics, 2018).

The Yosakoi festival may also have the potential to boost the economy, which was one of the reasons the shopping district wanted to start up the festival in the first place. Festivals and other cultural events could attract people from other parts of the world; while this is unlikely to cause an increase in rural population, it could potentially lead to an expansion of foreign trade or income from tourism. In a global economy it is important to maintain relationships with partners in other parts of the world. For example, Kōchi Prefecture through the Kōchi Industrial Promotion Center markets the prefecture’s strengths in technology. The prefecture positions itself as a locale for software support programs and a strong information based educational system (Japan
External Trade Organization, 2017). Events like the Yosakoi festival encourage more business activity by providing a unique social venue for business interactions.

The need for rural revitalization is very easily seen in Japan since it is one of the countries most impacted by depopulation in rural areas, aging, and decreasing birth rates. In Japan there is even a town called Nagi-chō that is paying couples to have children and helping with child support (Jozuka, 2018). Of course, these issues are not isolated to Japan. In the interconnected global community many developed countries face decreasing rural populations. In the United States the state of Vermont has implemented a grant program to pay young people to move there. Meanwhile, rural Iowa is giving away land to people willing to move there (Vasel, 2018).

Globalization has connected the world community more than at any other time in history. The trend of decreasing rural populations is partly caused by the technological advances that allowed for such advances as mechanized farming. Moving to cities for job opportunities has also forged a more convenient lifestyle but at the price of higher living
expenses and perhaps a more stressful life. Rural revitalization in Japan is more than just a glimpse into the possible future of other developed nations including the United States. Festivals like the Yosakoi festival, have a place in rural revitalization efforts, providing economic benefits while preserving the pride in a prefecture’s history. Civic pageants might not be rooted in tradition the same way the Shinto festivals are but might provide a modern compromise that tourists can participate in and still give locals a sense of connection to their prefecture’s stories. While the success of Japanese rural revitalization efforts is still an open question, it is possible that Japan’s efforts could provide fruitful answers to depopulation issues that face rural areas around the globe.
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