

1. Observation Report on Ohnan Town and Yoshika Town, Shimane Prefecture

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According to the Japan Policy Council estimate, by 2040, 896 of the 1799 municipalities (cities, wards, towns, and villages) nationwide (or 49.8%) will fit the description of a “Municipality in Jeopardy of Extinction¹.” Of all the municipalities in Shimane Prefecture, which was the target of our observations, 84.2% is considered to be “in jeopardy of extinction,” and this proportion is third highest among all the prefectures in Japan, after Akita and Aomori Prefectures.



On the other hand, according to the Shimane Prefectural Mountainous Regions Research Center’s study, which looked at population shifts by community center and elementary school districts, 73 districts (or 33%) have seen an increase in 2013 in the population of children age four and younger compared to 2008 figures; this increase is more prevalent in mountainous regions. Members of the Regional Community Power Forum visited Ohnan Town and Yoshika Town in Shimane Prefecture in October 2014 and observed examples of rural return migration.

Yoshika Town

Ohnan Town was created in October 2004 as a result of a merger of Hasumi Village, Mizuho Town, and Iwami Town, and Ohnan has actively sought newcomers to settle under the leadership of Mayor Ryoji Ishibashi. The town population has seen an annual increase by 20 persons in 2013. The population had decreased by 85 the year after the merger, while in 2012 it was only a 14-person decrease, and in the nine years since the merger the demographic trend has shifted to growth.

Aiming to Become the Best Village in Japan to Raise Children

In the 2010 Population Census of Japan, the total population of Ohnan Town had decreased by slightly under 1,000 persons since the last census, with a drop of over 200 persons from the cohort consisting of 18-year-olds and younger. This propelled the town to set a goal of “increasing our 18-and-under population to 1,800 persons” in ten years starting in 2011, and

¹ Municipalities that expect a decline in the young female population, between ages 20 and 39, to less than half the 2010 standards by 2040.

the town is promoting aid for families raising children. (The population count for 18-year-olds and younger in 2010 was 1,660.) Specifically, the town set policies to promote the following: free child care after the second child, free meals at child care facilities, and free medical care until a child graduates from junior high school. Besides these new policies, the town invited an obstetrician-gynecologist whom the town previously lacked, and provided up to sixteen prenatal exams to expecting mothers for free. Five-year funding was secured for these programs through the Promotion Fund to Make Ohnan the Best Village in Japan to Raise Children, which was created by utilizing the Japanese government's Anti-Depopulation Measure Project Bond for public services enhancing the town's soft infrastructure. A total of 250 million yen had been accumulated for this purpose.

In 2013, Japan's total fertility rate (or the average number of children a woman gives birth to in her lifetime) was 1.43, but Ohnan Town greatly surpassed the national average with the past five-year average rate of 2.20 and the 2013 rate of 2.65. Magazines and television shows featured this effort to create an environment conducive to having and raising children, and to make the town more woman-friendly in general, and the town has been gaining a reputation for being a "single mother-friendly town."

"Development of a Class-A Gourmet Town"



Ajikura, a former Sake Brewery

Wagyu beef, Iwami pork, vegetables, and herbs. At Ajikura, which is a former *sake* brewery that was converted into a restaurant, guests can enjoy an Italian course meal using local ingredients grown and raised with local pride. Providing class-A gourmet has also served as a movement to change the awareness of local residents into having a sense of "village pride."

In 2011, Ohnan Town's Vision for Cooperation among Agriculture, Forestry, Commerce, and Industry was formulated, and efforts to become a "Class-A Gourmet Town" also began. This is an initiative aimed at creating employment for newcomers and return-migrants from the perspective of food and agriculture (Oe, 2014). Class-A gourmet is defined as "meals and experiences that can only be experienced here." From Ajikura, a restaurant managed directly by the town's tourism bureau, the town promotes their class-A gourmet, or the delicious meals prepared with local rice, Iwami

There is another restaurant called Petit Ajikura within Ohnan Town, and a total of nine people are working at these two sites. Among the nine, five are trainees who are called "Cultivating Chefs," and all five also serve on the Community Revitalization Cooperation Corps. The name, Cultivating Chefs, was coined with the hope that these chefs "not only cook meals but grow vegetables with their own hands, cultivate people's potentials, and cultivate the community." Until October 2013, these trainees received training from Mr. Misao Yoneda, a local expert on natural and organic farming. They are expected to become successors to the class-A gourmet through their involvement in not only cooking but agriculture as well.

Ohnan Town also has a young entrepreneur who is operating a natural-grazing dairy farm. Mr. Masaaki Suhama of Sixth Produce, Ltd., was born to a dairy-farming family, and started his own

farm after learning about natural grazing while in college. He grazes his cows at the stocking rate of one cow per hectare, and has built a repeat customer base who enjoy his milk that is made the good old-fashioned way.

Supporting Newcomers

Ohnan Town provides “thorough care for newcomers” in order to build a town community that accommodates the needs of newcomers and return migrants. For this endeavor, the Settlement Support Coordinator serves an important role. One staff from the town’s Settlement Promotion Department serves full-time in this position, and the current coordinator, Mr. Ryu Yokosu, himself is a newcomer. Mr. Yokosu not only supports newcomers in locating housing and employment, but also provides guidance on everyday issues such as neighborhood relations. “Thorough care” for newcomers do not stop at the point of settling, but extends to follow-up care upon settlement as well, and this support system provides the backdrop of the increase they have seen in newcomers.



a stage to be processed at a working union

Community Development through Organic Farming in Former Kakinoki Village

Yoshika Town, Shimane Prefecture, is located in the mountainous region two and a half hours away by car from the Hiroshima Airport. The town was created as a result of a merger between Muikaichi Town and Kakinoki Village in October 2005. The village is surrounded by a 1,000-meter mountain range, and the Takatsu River, touted the cleanest river in Japan, runs through beautiful pastoral scenery.

The former Kakinoki Village started reaching out to and receiving newcomers in fiscal year 2003, and a total of 116 persons (53 households) have migrated, with 85 of them (40 households) permanently settling in the past 11 years. Fiscal year 2011 was a notable year that saw an increase of newcomers reaching 29 persons, compared to ten or so in the previous years. This may have something to do with the trend in relocating to western Japan after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami.

The oil crisis of 1973 was a turning point for the former Kakinoki Village, which had since engaged in community development through organic farming. Mr. Atsushi Fukuhara, a former Kakinoki village employee, has been in the central role in this effort, and he is the current president of an NPO called “Yukibito.” Mr. Fukuhara says that when the oil crisis occurred while Japan was still experiencing rapid economic growth, he realized the importance of raising self-sufficiency rates in order for the people to live a richer life in the village. He proposed raising self-sufficiency to a local group of farming successors, but was initially received poorly because the current of the times then was to pursue cash crops.

Around the same time, Mr. Fukuhara attended an organic farming study group meeting in Yamaguchi Prefecture, and met a consumer group mostly made up of women. When he found out that the group members desired “not rice and vegetables produced for sale, but ingredients the farmers produce for their own families to eat,” he was convinced that this indeed was “farming that is an extension of self-sufficiency.” “Let’s provide our excess produce,” he thought, and started providing vegetables. This was back in 1980. As this movement began, Mr. Fukuhara’s group, along with the supporters from the agricultural cooperative’s women’s bureau, launched the Kakinoki Village Organic Farming Study Group. This was the beginning of the history of



Organic production sold at a roadside station

Kakinoki Village’s organic farming.

Shipping to Various Places, Making the Most of Its Optimal Location

The mountainous region of Shimane Prefecture is characterized by its great transportation access. From Kakinoki Village, it takes less than two hours to reach Hiroshima City, with its population of one million, and the industrial cities on the coast of Seto Inland Sea are also close by. The news of Mr. Fukuhara and his colleagues’ work spread by word of mouth to cities such as Iwakuni and Tokuyama (both of Hiroshima Prefecture) and Masuda (of Shimane Prefecture), and for over thirty years, they have been engaging in farming that prioritize self-sufficiency, producing safe vegetables and rice, and sharing their excess produce to others.

Currently, a community action organization called Kakinoki Village Food and Agricultural Enterprise Cooperative serves as the hub, and each small production group – such as the Organic Farming Study Group, processing cooperatives, and school lunch production group – produces what each wants to produce. Their produce are shipped to various places, with the market having been established to roadside rest areas, the Consumers’ Co-operative Union (and their Green Co-op Union), supermarkets in Hiroshima City and Yamaguchi City, natural foods restaurants, and the so-called “antenna shops” which introduce local produce and products to other regions of Japan.

Connecting to the Flow of Newcomer Settlement

Newcomer settlers and new farmers tend to enjoy the lifestyle of Half Farmer and Half X, engaging in forestry or other agricultural businesses on the side. With an environment that welcomes taking on different things, newcomer settlers deepen their relationships with each other by holding their own study groups or gathering at a farmer-restaurant that has been renovated from an old-style house.

Information on moving to Yoshika Town can be found at the town’s official Newcomer Settlement Exchange Portal Site. The site supports newcomer settlement by introducing all the charming and attractive aspects of living in Yoshika Town, providing information on the settlement experience program, and posting first-hand accounts of newcomer settlers as “Yoshika Resident Voices.”