

Article

Overview of Social Policies for Town and Village Development in Response to Rural Shrinkage in East Asia: The Cases of Japan, South Korea and China

Wenqi Li ¹, Li Zhang ^{1,*}, Inhee Lee ² and Menelaos Gkartzios ^{3,4}

¹ College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, Shanghai 200092, China; 2110302@tongji.edu.cn

² Department of Architecture, Pusan National University, Busan 46241, Republic of Korea

³ Centre for Rural Economy, School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK

⁴ Department of City and Regional Planning, Faculty of Architecture, Izmir Institute of Technology, Gulbahce Campus Urla, Izmir 35430, Turkey

* Correspondence: leonzsh@tongji.edu.cn

Abstract: Globally speaking, Asian countries, especially East Asian countries, are facing acute national depopulation situation and severe rural shrinkage development. Based on the continuous surveys of town and village development in Japan, South Korea, and China, this study aims to provide an overview of social policies that have been implemented in the past or more recently in these three countries in response to rural shrinkage, and to outline the core philosophy of these practices to cope with the repercussions. In this paper, we analyze the overall process of rural depopulation and the present features of town and village development in three countries. We subsequently present the social policies over the last few decades and summarize them into four major groups. Furthermore, we highlight that the focus of social policies is not to seek possible ways to reestablish growth but to provide positive support and effective reform to adjust and satisfy the changing needs of towns and villages under the circumstances of shrinking development, including the optimization of public resource allocation, exploring institutional innovation to valorize abandoned assets, and developing endogenous potentials for future sustainable development. Qualitative methods from a combination of literature review, policy review, and field surveys have mainly been adopted in this research. The study of East Asian practices may be instructive for other Asia-Pacific countries, as well as European countries that have been experiencing or will eventually face the challenges of rural shrinkage.

Keywords: rural depopulation; rural shrinkage; social policies; town and village; sustainable development; East Asia



Citation: Li, W.; Zhang, L.; Lee, I.; Gkartzios, M. Overview of Social Policies for Town and Village Development in Response to Rural Shrinkage in East Asia: The Cases of Japan, South Korea and China. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 10781. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151410781>

Academic Editor: Gema Cárdenas

Received: 31 May 2023

Revised: 2 July 2023

Accepted: 6 July 2023

Published: 10 July 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

A shrinking region is a region that has been losing a significant proportion of its population over a period greater than or equal to one generation [1]. Rural shrinkage, most directly characterized by a drastically reduced and highly aging population, is a pervasive global phenomenon [2]. In Europe, most rural regions are losing population due to legacy effects, including age structure, low fertility rates, and high mortality rates [3–5]. In Asia, a very substantial proportion of rural areas are experiencing depopulation, which is driven by the massive migration from rural to urban areas and the distorted age structures [6,7]. In some hilly and peripheral rural areas, the disadvantages of location and traffic accessibility further exaggerate the outflow of local inhabitants [8]. Due to demographic decline and aging, shrinking rural areas suffer from economic contraction, dwindling job opportunities, and ever-decreasing cultural attractiveness. In addition, many rural communities are faced with severe social erosion and the weakening of common identity and collective capacity [9].

In this regard, there is a growing consensus that rural shrinkage reflects not only the loss of population but also complex social problems, which call for broader societal objectives than economic growth [10]. However, either in practice or academic research, growth-oriented rural development theories and initiatives have long been the focus [8,11,12]. The narrow focus on economic development has been increasingly criticized due to its failure in solving many of the underlying causes of rural shrinkage [13,14]. On the other hand, relatively few studies have provided deep insight into the growing importance of social mechanisms in dealing with the issue of rural shrinking. Therefore, in this paper, we focus on the social policy perspective. We adopt the original concept of social philosophy by the German economist Adolf Wagner in promoting the economic and social-reform policies of Bismarck—that social policies are “state legislation and political interventions to eliminate the inequivalence in distribution”, in order to promote the overall welfare of society and achieve social justice and social stability [15]. Clearly, state intervention and general social welfare have been addressed in the composition of social policy. In this paper, we take a broad look at the scope of social policy, which includes the policies that are related to land, population, social welfare, spatial planning, and other relevant aspects.

The focus of this article is on East Asia, which can be seen globally as a pioneer of an aging and shrinking society [16]. Japan has the highest aging population rate in the world; meanwhile, South Korea has the lowest fertility rate. Due to the official population statistics in 2022, like its neighboring countries, China has seen a decline in population for the first time on record since 1970. Therefore, depopulation has been an issue of public concern, which is happening in both urban and rural areas in East Asia. (It has been reported that in 2022, Tokyo saw its first decline by 0.43% in 26 years, and seven major cities, including Seoul and Busan, in Korea also faced a downhill trend in population in 2022. In addition, China has witnessed urban depopulation recently, including the population decline in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, the four most developed cities, in 2022). While the negative population growth in metropolitan cities that mainly started in the last 10 years in these countries is mostly due to a natural decline, with population aging and extremely low fertility [17], high living costs, and suppressed influx interventions in some situations [18], rural shrinkage is the comprehensive outcome of national modernization and urbanization. In this case, how rural depopulation occurs and influences the national economic and social development in East Asian countries might enlighten us about future prospects for other Asia-Pacific countries experiencing similar post-war trajectories, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and New Zealand. Particularly speaking, the adaptive responses that have been made in these countries will be instructive for other European and African countries in that the trend of rural shrinkage is becoming increasingly prevalent on a global scale [19,20].

Therefore, we take Japan, South Korea, and China as examples. These three dominant economies of Asia are experiencing unprecedented rapid population aging. In 2021, 28.9% of the population in Japan was over 65 years old, while 16.6% in South Korea, and 14.2% in China were in this age group. Furthermore, the aging problem is much worse in rural areas. In Japan, the average age of agricultural workers in 2022 was 68.4 years old, about 2 years older than in 2010. In South Korea, the rural population declined to only 2,166,000 in 2022, and the proportion of the population over 65 years old in rural areas reached 49.8% in 2022, which was 32.8% higher than that of the whole population. In China, the proportion of people aged 65 and over in rural areas in 2020 was 17.7%, which was 6.6% higher than that in urban areas. In recent decades, these three countries have made great efforts to ameliorate the repercussions of rural shrinkage using a range of financial instruments, spatial planning, and integrated initiatives or policies. In particular, we can observe that the orientation of state interventions has been gradually shifted from revitalization oriented to a more general approach, enhancing social welfare provisions by targeting social justice and vitality [21,22]. Although a number of articles have discussed the rural policies of these three countries separately, there is a relative lack of comprehensive studies involving East Asian countries in cross-country research. We therefore investigate the philosophy of social

policies in mitigating rural shrinkage and its commonalities as well as the distinctions among the three countries.

The goal of the paper is to provide an overview of the state social policies for town and village development in response to rural shrinkage in three Asian countries—Japan, South Korea, and China. In this context, the article is intended to be a contribution to the international discussions on the priority of policies in dealing with rural shrinkage, introducing the frontier practices in Asia. On the one hand, we investigate the impact of changes in rural areas experiencing shrinkage, and on the other hand, we introduce the social policies that have contributed to the alleviation of repercussions due to various policy concentrations.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the materials and methods of empirical research. Section 3 presents the overall process of rural shrinkage in three countries, including the rural depopulation situation and the latest statistics (Section 3.1), and the main features of town and village development under the conditions of demographic and economic decline (Section 3.2). Section 4 presents the main content of social policies in response to rural shrinkage in three countries based on four orientations. In Section 5, the main findings of the three case studies are summarized in order to highlight the critical policy intentions of promoting sustainable development in shrinking rural areas. Finally, Section 6 presents conclusions and discussions on how rural areas can best adapt to structural change. Furthermore, the contribution of this article to the international discourse about rural shrinkage is highlighted.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Material Collection

The study is informed by the indigenous literature of Japan, South Korea, and China, and the English-language literature. Literature resources involve academic papers, policy documents, and other grey literature (technical reports), as well as statistical data collected from government agencies and affiliated groups. The demographic data of the three countries are collected from the statistical database or yearbook, which have been officially published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication of Japan, the Korean Statistical database (KOSIS), the National Bureau of Statistics of PRC, and the annual population census report. The sources of the data in the tables and figures are indicated.

2.2. Methods

To compare and summarize both the policy and practice in the three countries, this research mainly adopted qualitative methods with a combination of literature review, information gathering, and field surveys. The first stage of literature review involved relevant researches on rural shrinkage—including discussions on the definition of rural shrinkage, causes and consequences, global situations, and other related research topics—in order to have an overview of current academic progress. In the second stage, we took an in-depth focus on rural shrinkage situations in Asian countries. Special attention was paid to the historic and current conditions of rural development, issues and challenges about the development of towns and villages, as well as key academic approaches and areas of interest.

In parallel with the literature review, we reviewed policy documents and reports about rural development in the post-war period in the three studied countries. The policy review explored the aims of policies that have been introduced to address rural depopulation, the assessments of policy implementation, and the ways in which policy aims have shifted and changed during the development process.

Most of our qualitative materials (relevant municipal, regional, and state development programs and plans) were acquired from repeated field surveys in Japan, South Korea, and China since 2014, which were conducted by the Department of Urban Planning of Tongji University in China and assisted by local universities in Japan and South Korea, respectively. The joint research surveys were mainly undertaken in rural towns and villages,

including towns and villages in the Tama areas in Tokyo, Oita prefecture and Kunisaki city in Kyushu in Japan, towns in three cities in South Gyeongsang in South Korea, and towns and villages in 13 provinces in China. During the field surveys, interviews were held with the administrative officials of the town and village, members of local council, residents including native villagers and newcomers, entrepreneurs, leaders of local associations, and scholars from universities (Figure 1). Our interviews centered around what the main issues in rural communities or areas were, how local governments understood the changes and effects of rural shrinkage, what actions were taken in response to rural depopulation on the national and local levels, and what the residents' attitudes were towards the current situation. Furthermore, roundtable discussions and small academic gatherings were held during the process of the survey, with the participation of academics, local authorities, and social associations, in order to have detailed discussions about the problems associated with town and village development under the circumstances of rural shrinkage and policy implications from the perspective of different subjects. The information gained from the surveys was recorded and was further documented in reports.

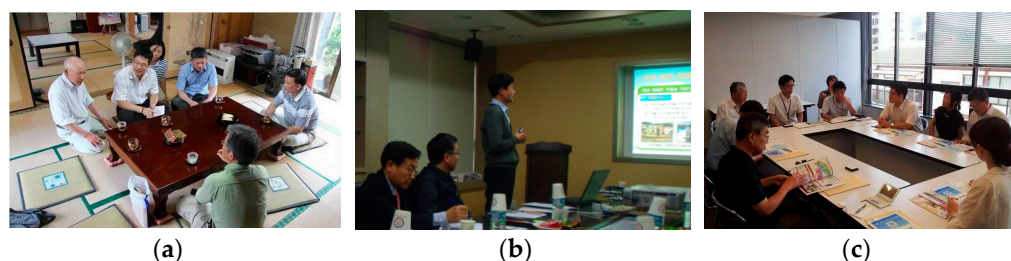


Figure 1. Reviews with villagers (a), local council (b), and roundtable discussions (c) in Japan and South Korea. Source: Authors.

3. Rural Shrinkage in Japan, South Korea, and China

3.1. Overall Process of Rural Depopulation

(1) Japan

Rural depopulation, often presented within the context of Japan's modernization and industrialization, is the outcome of a combination of social migration and natural decline. During the post-war period, rapid urbanization led to a polarization of the population and the economy in Japan's three largest urban agglomerations, particularly during the era of high economic growth (1950–1970). Meanwhile, the remote countryside experienced continuous outmigration and economic recession, driven by the fast-developing urban industries and poor rural working conditions [23]. The large number of social migrants from rural to urban areas caused severe demographic shrinkage in rural areas and local communities with increasing extreme low population density, which has been officially identified as the phenomenon of "rural depopulation" since the late 1960s. In the 21st century, the population of Japan's rural areas has been declining at an even faster rate, which is known as the period of "new rural depopulation" [24]. Compared to the last period, the natural decline in population, which is the result of both distorted age structures and low fertility observed across Japan as a whole, was the first driving factor for demographic decline in this period (Figure 2).

Overall, the main drivers of contemporary rural depopulation in Japan have shifted from social migration to natural decline (which is exacerbated by rural youth outmigration). The root cause of this phenomenon is that the huge gap between urban and rural employment has not been mitigated well. The surplus labor released by industrialized agriculture in the countryside failed to be adequately absorbed in local urban industries, accelerating the concentration of young labor workers in neighboring cities, while demographic issues such as low fertility and high aging further exacerbated the contraction and created a vicious circle of constant outflow.

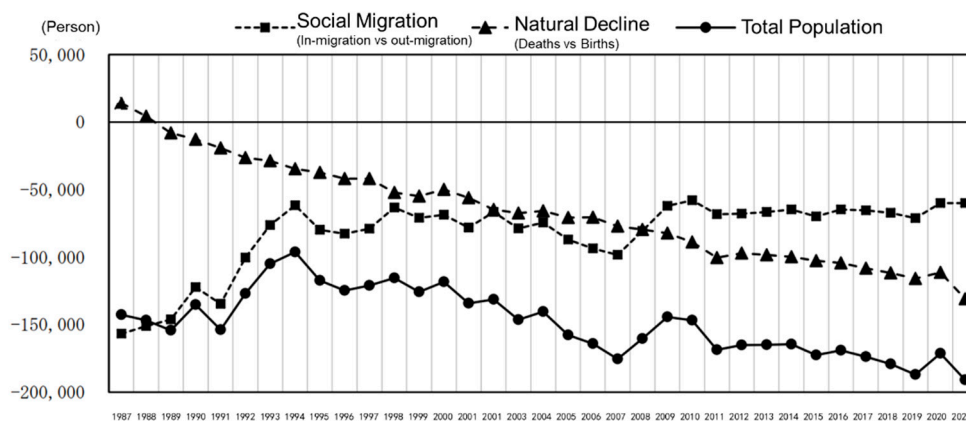


Figure 2. Demographic change (social migration and natural decline) during 1987–2021 in depopulated areas in Japan. Source: Japan government report, https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/jichi_gyousei/c-gyousei/2001/kaso/kasomain8.htm, accessed on 22 April 2023.

According to the official definition of depopulated areas (*kaso chiiki*) in Special Law Promoting Independence in Depopulated Areas, revised in 2010, and the latest survey, in 2021, there were 885 depopulated municipalities nationwide, which accounted for 51.5% of all municipalities and made up 63.2% of all administrative areas in Japan while accounting for only 9.3% of all population (Table 1). In terms of rural areas, over half of all the towns and villages are experiencing outmigration and a decline in vitality. Among them, some rural communities have been described as “*genkai shuraku*” or “communities on the edge” due to their extremely high proportion of the elderly population, which accounted for 20.6% of villages in the designated depopulation areas in 2014 [23,25].

Table 1. Comparison of municipality number, area, and population between the depopulated area and the non-depopulated area in Japan in 2021.

Area	Municipality (%)	Area (1000 km ² ,%)	Population (1000 Persons,%)
Depopulated area	885 (51.5%)	239 (63.2%)	11,669 (9.3%)
Non-depopulated area	834 (46.1%)	132 (34.9%)	114,185 (90.7%)
Nationwide	1719 (100%)	378 (100%)	114,477 (100%)

Source: Japan government report, https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/jichi_gyousei/c-gyousei/2001/kaso/kasomain8.htm, accessed on 22 April 2023.

(2) South Korea

South Korea has experienced rapid population changes since the industrialization period, which started in the 1960s. The maximum number for rural population was recorded in 1966 due to the post-war baby boom, after which a declining trend continued until 2010. Unlike Japan, most of the villages and towns in South Korea did not have a long history due to recent wars. Because of the lack of cultural attachment to rural settings and radical urbanization, which heavily depended on export-oriented industries and urban enterprises, the waves of outmigration from rural areas were induced in a compressed chronology; thus, the population in rural areas in South Korea declined more rapidly during the urbanization process than that in Japan. The robust population loss of the 1960s was followed by continued rural outflow in the next decades, driven by both pull effects from urbanization and push effects from restructuring of the rural economy. It is believed that the rural areas in South Korea have been disintegrating faster than in any other developed capitalist country in the world [22]. The share of rural population decreased sharply from nearly 60% of the total population in 1970 to only 19% of the total population in 2020 (Figure 3).

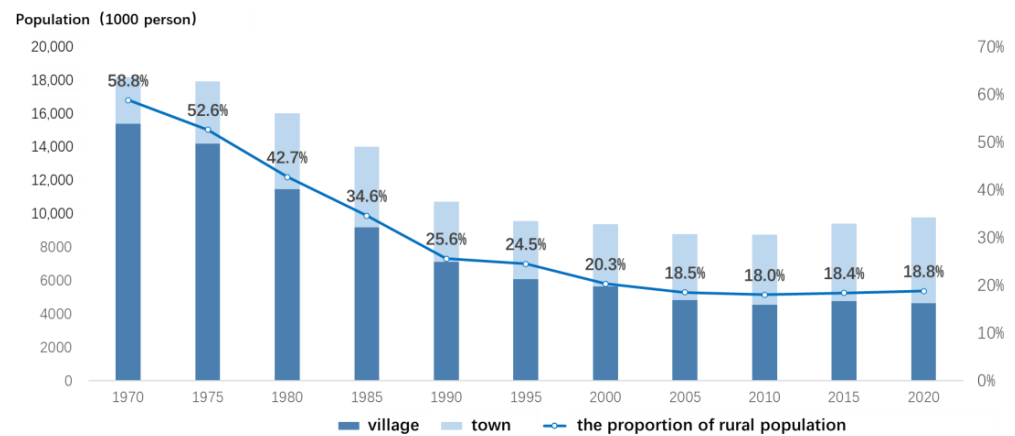


Figure 3. Population in rural areas and the proportion during 1970–2020 in South Korea. Source: Korean Statistical Information Service, <https://kosis.kr/>, accessed on 22 April 2023.

(3) China

China has experienced a decline in its rural population since the mid-1990s, albeit at a slower rate than that in Japan and South Korea (Figure 4). In recent years, however, it has also experienced an accelerated decline, roughly corresponding to the period in Japan in the 1970s and that in South Korea during the 1990s and 2000s. At present, China still has a huge potential for a higher urbanization rate. According to the latest data from the 7th National Census in 2020, over 63.9% of the total population were living in urbanized areas, which means that China has entered the middle and late stages of urbanization and that the trend of migration from rural to urban areas will remain unchanged for a long time. Given China's large population, the future number of migrants could still be enormous [19,26]. Meanwhile, future rural shrinkage will not only occur in backward and remote areas but will also become a widespread problem nationwide.

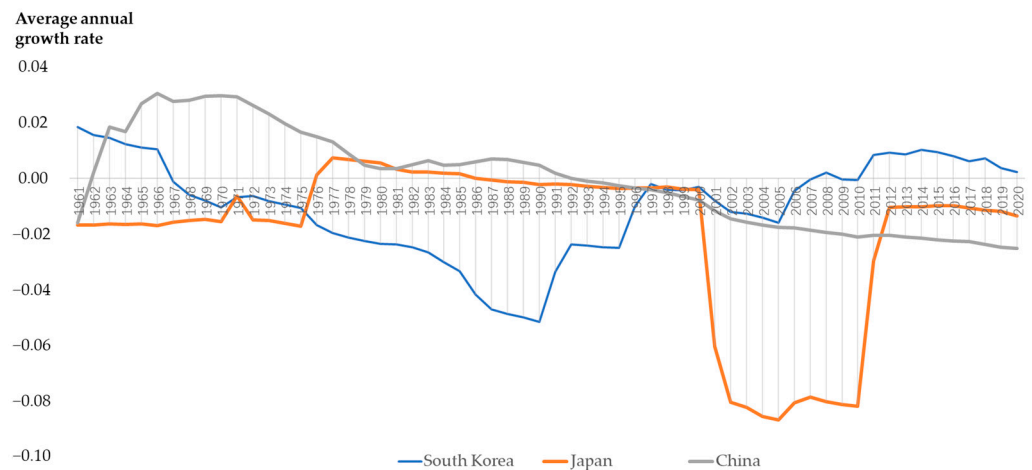


Figure 4. Comparison of the rate of growth (decline) of the rural population in China, Japan, and South Korea. Source: World Bank data 2021, accessed on 22 April 2023.

In addition to the demographic shrinkage, another major challenge facing rural China is the growing number of elderly and empty nesters. According to the mapping survey by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2016, there were 16 million empty-nest elderly in rural areas nationwide, accounting for about 12% of the total elderly population in rural areas. Meanwhile, the 2020 report of the National Health and Welfare Commission showed a significant divergence of the aging level between urban and rural populations, which was much higher in the rural areas. The proportion of the elderly population aged 60 and above and 65 and above to the total population in rural areas was 23.81% and 17.72%, respectively,

which was 7.99% and 6.61% higher than that in urban areas, respectively. In addition, the 2021 4th Sample Survey on the Living Conditions of the Elderly in Urban and Rural China showed that the number of empty-nest elderly exceeded 100 million, accounting for over 25% of the total rural population.

3.2. Features of Rural Shrinkage

Observing the process of rural shrinkage in these three countries reveals a vicious circle of intertwined and accelerated outmigration, aging, and worsening fertility rates. Due to the demographic decline and aging, rural towns and villages suffered from a number of interrelated challenges for development. Japanese scholars have described the process of rural shrinkage as “the collapse of productive and living institutions” [27] and have argued that it essentially represents the disintegration of rural society as a productive and living space [10]. Overall, the direct negative effects of depopulation on the development of rural areas include the economic downturn, the loss of original community functions, the decline of community vitality, the pressures in providing public services such as educational facilities, and the merging of municipalities. Some pressing problems facing shrinking rural communities have attracted further attention.

(1) Vacancy of housing and public facilities. According to data released by Japan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in 2018, 8.5 million of the country’s 60.6 million dwellings in rural areas were vacant, representing a vacancy rate of 14%. A similar situation also occurred in China. According to the survey of the Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Affairs of PRC, 9.3% of rural houses are constantly vacant (vacant for 10 months or more) in China. Korea’s 2010 National Housing Census also shows that the vacancy rates in rural towns and villages were significantly higher than in cities (Figure 5). Among them, more than half of the vacant houses were long-term (over a year) vacancies, revealing a persistent situation of rural housing abandonment. In addition, the latest data in 2021 showed an increase in the vacancy rate of rural houses, which was 10.6% in towns and 14.5% in villages.

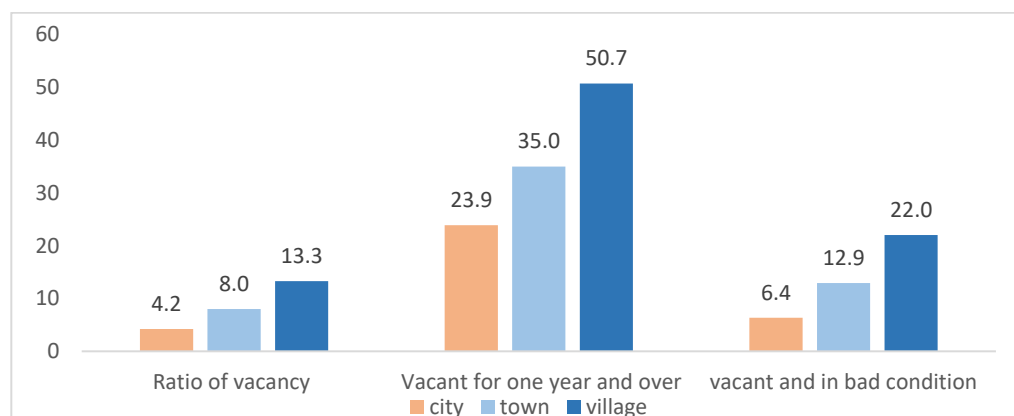


Figure 5. Survey of the proportion of vacant houses in South Korea in 2014 (%). Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs of Korea. Housing Census. <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/surveyOutline/7/1/index.static>, accessed on 22 April 2023.

(2) Farmland abandonment. The exodus of the labor force has had a direct impact on traditional rural agricultural production. On one hand, the decline in farming laborers has led to the abandonment of a large amount of farmland or conversion of farmland to other uses, especially in South Korea, where the control of rural farmland is more flexible [28]. A higher proportion of abandoned agricultural land has been converted to non-agricultural land. On the other hand, in Japan and China in particular, as the farming capacity of individuals and families declines and the cost of farming rises, the trend to consolidate agricultural land on a larger scale under the operation of new farming

communes or external enterprises instead of individual farming families is becoming increasingly prevalent.

(3) Decline in endogenous capacity. In addition to the lack of human resources, the disruption of the endogenous capacity of rural communities is also reflected in the weakening of the local economic capacity, particularly in terms of revenue. Taking Japan as an example, the local taxation is mainly comprised of residential tax and real estate tax for individuals and households. With the population being an important tax base, the potential impact of declining population (households) is the reduction in the local taxation capacity. As we learned from interviews in Otama Town, Tokyo, in 2014, local taxes contributed only 12% to the fiscal revenue, with the remaining 88% of fiscal revenue coming from subsidies from the central government and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, while livelihood costs accounted for a large proportion of local fiscal expenditures.

4. Orientation of Social Policies in Response to Rural Shrinkage

4.1. Develop Rural Towns as the Connecting Link between Urban and Rural Areas

Rural towns have traditionally been vital elements of settlements to provide services, goods, and employment opportunities, and offer access to public transport not only for its inhabitants but also for the hinterland [29,30]. However, affected by the shrinking population and challenges from the constant growth of urban centers, rural towns inevitably face problems such as the inability to attract capital investments, as well as inadequate public service provisions and, as a result, a loss of attractiveness for both urban and rural populations [31]. However, rural towns still have a number of advantages. Their dual attributes of urban and rural characteristics enable them to serve as a hub, linking rural and urban areas, and an important strategic site for public resource allocation.

Therefore, policies in all three countries have reinforced the central role of rural towns in fulfilling multiple societal functions, in particular, acting as network nodes. Since 1995, the concept of “strengthen the function of rural towns to serve farmers” has been repeatedly emphasized in the national development or urbanization policy in China [32]. Meanwhile, the aim of developing rural towns has shifted from promoting rural development through township industrialization to selectively developing *specialized towns* with certain characteristics through the fiscal and land support, and preferential investment policy. In 2016, 127 rural towns were designated as specialized towns by the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of PRC, shouldering the responsibility to better serve the surrounding rural areas and promote urban-rural linkages [33]. In Japan, the development of rural towns has long been an important strategy in the successive configurations of the National Spatial Plan and regional policy measures, with the purpose of integrating rural towns by developing metropolitan areas and promoting balanced regional development. Other than spatial planning, national governments have adopted a range of supportive policies by state investment in utilities, regional support programs [23], and fiscal redistribution [8], such as the introduction of local allocation tax systems, which enable financially weaker local governments with low tax incomes to obtain subsidies to achieve an adequate level of public services.

In South Korea, the *Rural Town Development Project* is a long-term state policy that has been in place for 40 years, from 1972 to 2012. (Table 2). The project was proposed by the Korea Rural Economic Institute, and it targeted the eup (town) and myeon (village) areas, which are classified as rural areas. The main goal of the project was to develop rural towns as nodes linking urban and rural areas in order to reduce urban-rural disparities. The first three phases of the project adopted similar approaches, focusing on the renovation and upgrading of the infrastructure and public facilities in rural towns. The fourth phase focused on exploring the development potential of rural towns and emphasized the “quality” of policy implementation over “quantity”. Priority was given to supporting rural towns that made substantial improvements during the first three phases before providing universal benefits. The 10-year plan of *Integrated Rural Town Cultivation Programme (2002–2012)* further indicated the progressive allocation of subsidies: The government took responsibility for

funding infrastructure construction in the first three years, while in the following seven years, private investments and spontaneous construction were the main financial sources for rural towns to develop independently [34].

Table 2. Four stages of the Rural Town Development Project in South Korea.

Stage	Small Cities Cultivation Program	Rural Town Nurturing Program	Rural Town Development Program	Integrated Rural Town Cultivation Program	
Time	1972–1976	1977–1989	1990–2001	2002–2012	
Target	To develop a rural center	To develop rural towns as cities	To alleviate the urban-rural disparity	To balance regional development	
Objectives	Developing rural towns as hubs of life, culture, and logistics in surrounding rural areas	Improving the backward living environment of small towns and fostering the production capacity to enable them to develop comprehensive functions as small cities	Optimizing the regional economy and improving local residential and living infrastructure to balance welfare provision and reduce the urban-rural disparity	Expanding the function of small towns as complex centers, making them new production hubs and new residential spaces in order to contribute to balanced regional development	
Measures	Focus on improving the basic environment, and the street and market environment (roads, rivers, buildings, billboards, car parks, roadside gutters, narrow alleyways, power grids, etc.)	Focusing on the improvement of the basic environment such as streets and markets, the scope and scale of the project has been expanded in comparison with the “small cities cultivation project”	Street improvement: road and sewerage improvements, etc. Environmental improvement: improved housing, etc. Market and logistics facilities improvement: cleaning the central commercial street, etc.	Developing representative and highly competitive local industries; support for modern and professional construction projects such as markets and central shopping streets; upgrade of urban infrastructure; preservation of traditional cultural and historical resources and revitalization of tourism	
Numbers of participating towns and villages	Selected	150	1458	1443	194
	Implemented	397	844	606	100
Amount of subsidy (billion KRW per town/village)	0.1	1.65	12.4	300	

Source: Collected by authors from interviews.

4.2. Establish Local Life Circle System to Allocate Public Resources

In considering how to allocate public services and infrastructure equitably and effectively in shrinking rural areas, the concept of the “life circle” was originally proposed in Japan and then successively introduced in the social policies in South Korea, China, and other Asian countries. The aim of building multi-level life circles is to plan hierarchical levels of public service allocation according to population size and spatial scale and integrate the rural areas into the service range of large towns and cities, in order to compensate for the lack of capacity to provide services in shrinking rural areas as a result of population decline.

Since the first national comprehensive development plan in 1965, Japan has been working on the construction of local life circles. A basic life circle refers to a basic living unit that can meet the primary production and living needs of residents [35,36]. A system of life circles with four levels has gradually been established through four national plans from 1965 to 1992. On the macro regional scale, a *wide area life circle* has been put forward as the basic unit of regional development. In 1975, in order to coordinate the relationship between people and the environment in the third national comprehensive development plan, the Japanese government intended to control the population and industries in large

cities and established a new living circle, which was divided into three types, including residential areas (basic living units), fixed residential areas (composed of several residential areas), and settlement circles (composed of several fixed residential areas, equivalent to a city). At the municipal scale, a system of local life circles is comprised of four zoning levels, corresponding to various service ranges and levels of facility provisions (Figure 6). In addition, local life circles have become an important way of optimizing the community structure and administrative division of rural areas in Japan.

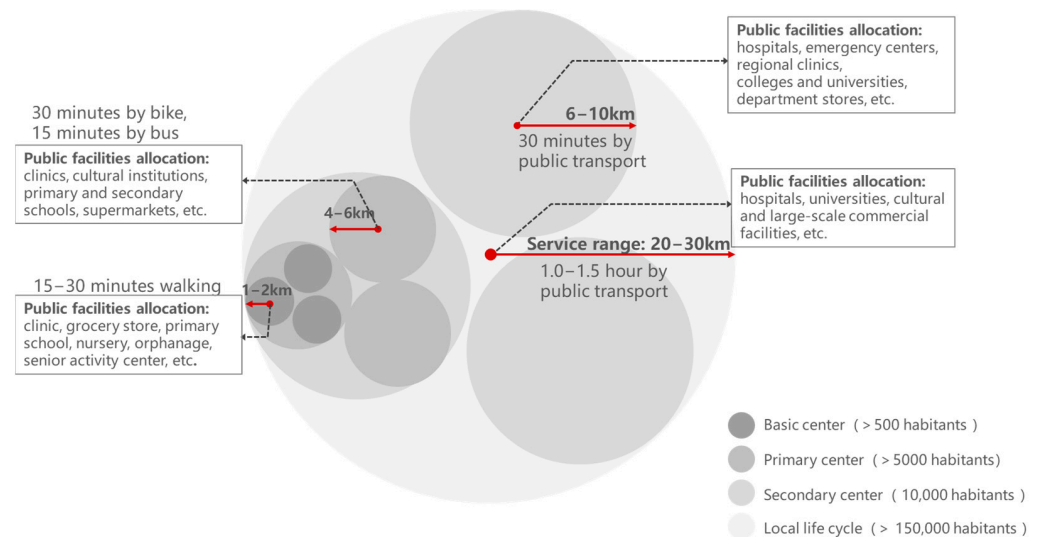


Figure 6. Theoretical model of local life cycle systems in Japan. Source: Author.

Based on the original concept from Japan, a regional cooperative approach has been gradually emphasized in practice in South Korea, making life circles a zone for better cooperation beyond jurisdiction at a larger spatial scale. The concept of life circle systems was first introduced in South Korea in 1990 in the third Rural Town Development Project, and it has been continuously developed and integrated into the plan of regional development. The concept of a *rural 365 living zone* has recently been proposed, with the purpose of strengthening the basic functions of town and rural centers and improving the accessibility of surrounding villages to guarantee that residents can use basic public services. A system of public services has been planned according to various spatial distances. Retail, health, and childcare services should be allocated within a 30-min driving distance; higher level services of culture, education, and medicine should be provided within a 60-min driving distance; and safety and emergency networks should be accessible within a 5-min driving distance to accommodate senior citizens living alone (Figure 7).

During the process of regional development, a practical need for regional cooperation for sharing development was proposed by local authorities. In 2013, *happy living zones* were introduced in response to the need for sustainable and efficient public service delivery in rural areas. Different from the previous plan, this project is initiated every five years by the association of local governments in the zone. It covers various interlocal cooperation projects such as economic revitalization, education, culture, welfare, and basic infrastructure. In 2016, 21 agricultural and fishing village life circles and 14 urban-rural life circles were proposed nationwide, which has greatly improved interregional cooperation [37]. However, the project has also been criticized for the lack of a careful review of regional settlement characteristics such as regional economic infrastructure, social exchanges, and public services, and the lack of public consensus on the social necessity and feasibility of linkages and integration between regions in each case [38].

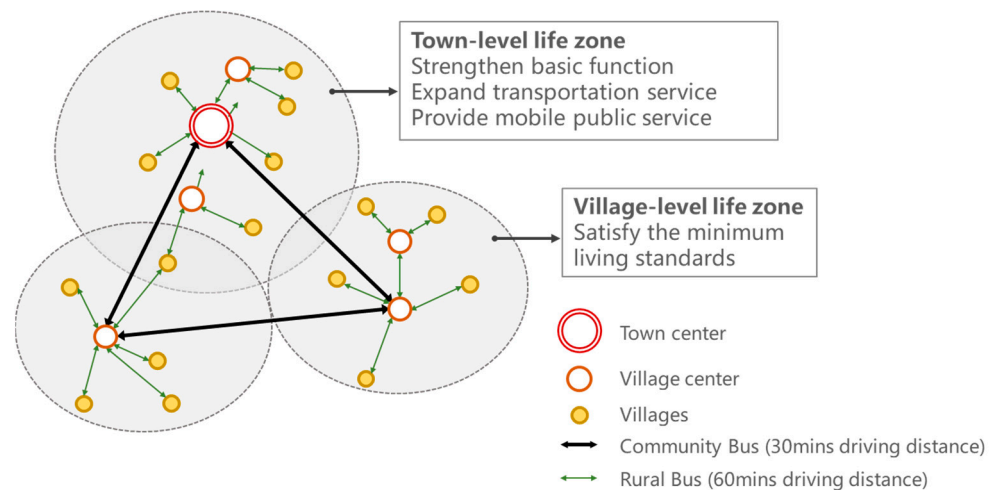


Figure 7. Theoretical model of the self-sufficient rural 365 living zone in South Korea. Source: Author.

4.3. Propose Systematic Strategies to Encourage Migration from Urban to Rural Areas

To optimize the aging demographic structure, effective in-migration is of critical importance to increase the vitality of rural areas. In this regard, encouraging urban residents to settle in rural areas has been an important policy design to promote urban-rural mobilities [39]. In Japan's policies, the in-migration of residents from urban to rural has been categorized into three areas: U-migration refers to the migrants of rural origin who move to the city and then move back to their rural hometowns; I-migration refers to migrants of urban origin moving to rural areas; and urban-rural amphibious residents refer to people who have houses in both urban and rural areas and move between the two areas depending on their living conditions. To promote U-migration and I-migration, the central government has set up an online bank of vacant houses to provide a platform for housing transactions, and many municipal governments have introduced various levels and forms of housing subsidies to encourage urban residents to settle in rural areas (see also Atterton et al. [40]).

In addition, the subsidies for new residents are progressive, meaning that the amount of subsidy is closely related to the number of years of actual residency. In the case of Okutama Town in Tokyo, given its difficulty in large-scale development due to its hilly location, three different measures have been taken to provide housing for new residents. (1) Selling the residential land at a low price. A third party, which is organized by the town government and other interested parties, purchases the land with local government funds and develops it, and then offers the subdivided land to new resident families at a low price in order to cut the cost of building a house. (2) Home purchase subsidy for young people. The government rents houses to young people at a reduced rate, charging a monthly rent of around 30,000 yen (this price is very low compared to the average monthly rent of 80,000 yen in the neighboring city of Aomori) for a two-room flat with a usable area of 70 m². (3) Banks of vacant houses. The local government proactively purchases or leases vacant houses in good condition and rents them out to groups who are willing to rent. For example, artists might rent the houses as small creative bases. Based on the fieldwork in Okutama Town, these governmental policy houses for sale and rent were basically fully occupied, which means that the policy objective of in-migrating new residents has been well achieved.

In South Korea, the strategic project of *Returning to Farming and Villages* is a systematic and comprehensive combination of a range of supporting policies, including providing professional education and training for new farmers, and offering social benefits in terms of housing purchase, health welfare, economic activities, tax support, etc. [41]. Since 2007, local governments such as that in Kangjin County have spontaneously introduced a range of policies to support the trend of people returning to villages and taking up agriculture. In 2012, based on the practice of local governments, the central government officially launched the *Returning to Farming and Villages* program and its related regulations and

legislations, in order to promote migrations from urban to rural areas in a planned way. Over the past decade, the policies have proven to have a positive effect on nurturing young agriculturalists and promoting urban-rural exchanges [42].

In China, although the formal migrations from urban to rural areas have been strictly controlled due to the restrictions of the dual hukou system (urban and rural) (see more in Chan and Zhang [43]) and the dual land system (nationalization land and rural collective land) in the past few decades, many efforts are in their infancy in eliminating institutional barriers for encouraging more mobility from urban to rural areas. In terms of land systems, land property rights and their roles in promoting rural-urban integration have recently been identified as key reform areas by China's leadership. In 2013, The CPC Central Committee put forward the reform proposition of establishing a unified construction land market for urban and rural areas in the *Decision About Comprehensively Deepening the Reform on Some Major Issues*. In 2014, improving the system of integration of urban and rural development was proposed in the *Policy Advice on Comprehensively Deepening Rural Reform and Accelerating the Process of Agricultural Modernization*, which was a momentous development concerning national land issues [44]. In 2020, the equal market entry of rural collective construction land was once again emphasized as an important support for promoting market-based allocation of elements in urban and rural areas. In this case, several experiments have been carried out on the provincial and city levels to explore approaches to eliminate migration restrictions and exploit the value of rural land effectively on the basis of protecting the villagers' profits. These experiments include the integration of construction and collective land markets in Shenzhen, land security in Chongqing, and the rural-urban integration in Chengdu [45].

4.4. Strengthen Endogenous Impetus to Promote Cultural Self-Confidence

In response to rural shrinkage, a critical question is what kind of development the residents in shrinking areas may want? Since the 1990s, there has been a clear turn towards endogenous development (i.e., locally differentiated and bottom-up development; see, for example, Gkartzios and Lowe [46]; and OECD [47]) in Japan, practiced by the *One Village One Product Movement* and *Specialized Towns and Villages Development* policies. Although both policies have a strong focus on endogenous factors, they differ slightly in orientation. The *One Village One Product Movement* policy emphasized the importance of local product and brand development, while the *Specialized Towns and Villages Development* policy aimed to strengthen the full development of the local community and revitalize towns and villages by making the best use of local skills and resources, including history, geography, local customs, and culture. The creation of specialized towns and villages required not only typical endogenous resources but also the common will and cultural self-confidence from residents, as well as a unique strategy for planning and development. The cooperation of residents, government, and social organizations was encouraged during the cultivation of specialized villages. Nowadays, concepts for endogenous development continue to be a primary principle for the design of regional policy, as is the case internationally (see, for example, Gkartzios et al. [48]).

Because of the considerable number of successful cases in Japan, the concept of endogenous development has been widely followed by South Korea and China in their later policies. Based on the problems that have arisen from past development policies for backward regions, in 2014, South Korea proposed the *New Vitality Project* to activate the local development impetus and lessen financial dependence on state government. In contrast to the previous policy, which focused on the renovation of facilities and the built environment, the *New Vitality Project* focused more on the concept of "soft environment" development, emphasizing the development of local characteristics and resources [49,50]. In China, the ongoing *Rural Revitalization Strategy* also emphasizes the adherence to the primary role of local villagers. At the same time, the prevalence of modern technology innovation, including mobile internet and online shopping, is rapidly revolutionizing production and consumption in rural areas [51,52]. This new trend has provided the

unprecedented opportunity for towns and villages that are in decline to find unique options for development by promoting and exploiting their existing advantages in ecological environment and scenery, organic agricultural products, cultural specialties, and so on, through the platform of online social media, instead of only depending on governmental and external support.

5. Interpreting the Policy Philosophy of Promoting Sustainable Development in Shrinking Rural Areas

5.1. Acknowledging Depopulation While Maintaining Rural Vitality

Over the past decades, a range of projects, initiatives, and plans have been implemented in rural areas, both at a national and a local level, which have had a positive effect on increasing agricultural productivity, improving living conditions, and facilitating the return of migrants. However, in general, rural population decline caused by demographic structural changes is difficult to avoid. For example, in Okutama Town in Japan, the total population decreased by 32.6% between 2000 and 2015, despite the continued promotion of revitalization initiatives. The limited achievement in population growth over has led some scholars to believe that most rural areas in Japan, South Korea, or China will inevitably continue to shrink, assuming that communities currently on the verge of collapse will disappear in the near future [53,54]. Therefore, instead of discussing how to revitalize communities, it is more important to discuss how to better “live beyond growth” [13]. In this context, rather than seeking to reestablish growth, effective management of the problems created by depopulation and a focus on achieving community stability may be the most constructive response (see also Dilley et al. [39]).

In a more profound sense, social policy should play a role in preparing for the future of shrinking but more sustainable societies. Under the general trend of rural shrinkage, it is necessary to objectively acknowledge the development and evolution of villages and towns and seek an appropriate balance between spatial agglomeration and social justice, focusing on the creation and maintenance of rural vitality rather than just the importation of population. In terms of policy priorities, policies should recognize the need to provide a nuanced and adaptive-oriented focus, and pursue adaption and management in order to maximize the quality of life [55,56]. The scope of social policy should involve a broadening of goals beyond economic and population growth to address territorial inclusion, spatial justice, and well-being, and to present alternative opportunities and options of development for shrinking rural regions.

5.2. Optimizing Resources Allocation by Strengthening Central Function of Rural Towns

Given the long-term demographic trend of population aging and outmigration in rural areas, initiatives like life circles have become increasingly essential, as it is no longer feasible to provide comprehensive public services in all municipalities and fiscal challenges are expected to increase. In this regard, policy initiatives that further mobilize regional linkages to enhance the quality of residents’ lives, deliver services more efficiently, and cooperate to pursue economic opportunities should be prioritized.

The main idea of life circle policies implemented in three countries is to build a hierarchical spatial model for the allocation of public service facilities. This idea strengthens the level of public services in rural centers, as well as differentiating investment of resources. In addition, it integrates the system of public services in both rural and urban areas to improve the efficiency of governmental supplements in depopulated areas. On the one hand, basic necessities should be guaranteed at the lowest level; on the other hand, services and facilities can be provided and shared in the higher settlement tiers. Thus, the planning of rural towns and cities should take full consideration of the needs of surrounding rural communities. This also provides an important empirical reference to explore how to establish a linkage between urban and rural areas on a larger scale.

5.3. Exploring Institutional Innovation to Valorize the Abandoned Resources

The experience of Japan and South Korea shows that the response to rural shrinkage should not simply be the relocation of people and space; it requires active institutional innovation. Based on our surveys in three countries, it is a common situation that many closed rural schools, obsolete factories, old administrative offices, and other rural public assets are in a dormant state, without a plan for demolition or renovation. Under this scenario, a proactive plan for the preservation and renovation of local assets should be an important part of the response to rural shrinkage, including the valorization of rural assets, the reuse of vacant houses, and the redevelopment of rural land, in order to effectively grapple with the negative effects of shrinkage.

Currently, in response to the growing number of vacant houses, many governments in Japan have launched online housing banks to provide a platform for residents to trade houses and encourage households with vacant houses to rent out their houses on their own initiative, so as to promote a combination of supply and demand in the rental housing market. In South Korea, abandoned schools and vacant housing assets in rural areas are suggested to be renovated to provide multiple public functions for local residents (Figure 8). In China, the revolution of rural land regulation is under incremental exploration. In 2019, the usage rights of rural-collective-owned industry-used land, most of which is used inefficiently, were legally permitted to be sold in the urban-rural land market, which will undoubtedly promote the utilization of rural inefficient land and the assets on it.

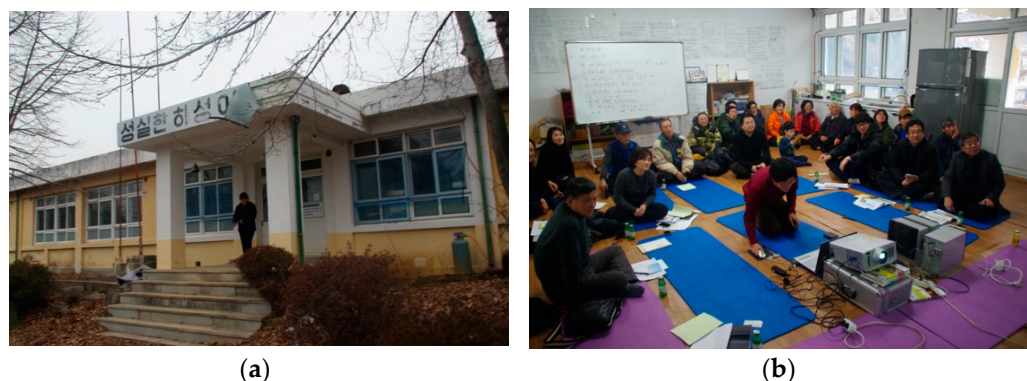


Figure 8. Closed primary school (a) and its new function as a community center (b) in villages visited in South Korea.

5.4. Developing Endogenous Potentials and Emphasizing the Local Value

While rural shrinkage is a prevalent social phenomenon, it means a complete structural transformation for each town and village community. State policies have limitations in recognizing the heterogeneity of local needs, which could be the reason why there was a reluctance in some rural areas to adopt them. On the other hand, despite the decline in population, unique characteristics of rural areas must be preserved as part of the region's identity [16]. Therefore, place-based policy-making approaches are increasingly indispensable in the search for solutions to rural shrinkage. Japan witnessed a policy shift from top-down to bottom-up in the 1990s, while South Korea and China have been continuously emphasizing the importance of local values and the stimulation of collective will. In the rural development practice of these three countries, locally tailored strategies are required.

In terms of governance, the future development of rural shrinkage will inevitably involve the participation of many parties, and there is an urgent need to establish a network of multiple actors, including the government, the rural community, and society [47]. Therefore, a public-private-civic coalition is of great importance to cope with the inability of the local community. For example, the involvement of social organizations is an important support for the dynamism of Japan's rural policy. As the problem of rural shrinkage remains serious, aid from social sectors has become increasingly diversified. Non-profit organizations and

social enterprises play a central role as coordinators to improve the communication and exchange between urban and rural areas. In this case, a “local welfare community” with the symbiosis of external impulses and local actors can gradually be developed.

In addition, faced with the reality of an aging population, an important shift in local participation is to provide the elderly with more opportunities to engage in community activities. In shrinking rural areas, the senior population has become the major group. However, most of them still have the willingness to contribute to the development of local villages and towns, based on our observation. In a visit to Japan, it was found that there are organizations, such as the “Longevity Association”, which are formed by local senior citizens over 70 years old who volunteered to undertake landscaping work, such as weeding and cutting branches in villages, after technical training (Figure 9). As can be seen, the Japanese government is actively encouraging and supporting the activities of senior citizens’ associations and fulfilling their desire to contribute to their hometown rather than being treated as a burden to society. At the same time, the engagement of the elderly strengthens their sense of belonging and well-being.



Figure 9. Local senior citizens over 70 years old who volunteered to do landscaping work in villages in Kunisaki City in Japan.

6. Conclusions and Discussions

6.1. Conclusions

A shrinking population has become a major trajectory for many rural regions around the world. Among them, rural areas in Asian countries, especially in East Asian countries, have been disintegrating at a faster rate than those in the western and northern parts of the world, due to the megacity-centered urbanization and industrialization, and unprecedentedly rapid population aging. The resulting decrease in the young and educated population directly leads to difficulties in employment and agricultural production, inducing the downward spiral of economic downturn, farmland abandonment, and declining social functions. In this regard, shrinking rural areas are recognized in crisis [39] and seem to be chronic targets of national and regional policy [8].

Continuous efforts have been made in the social policies of three countries—Japan, South Korea, and China—to tackle rural shrinkage. An overview of relevant policies shows a common trend in social policies in these three countries; that is, the scope of policies is not limited to boosting the population growth, but also to accepting and adapting to the changing dynamics, responding early to new opportunities, and contributing to the sustainable development of towns and villages by enhancing the central roles of rural towns, improving public resource allocation, exploiting abandoned facilities and resources, and developing endogenous values. In addition, various features can be reflected in the policies of these three countries.

In Japan, there is much awareness for the need to support the development of shrinking rural areas, both at the central and the local government levels, as well as among local residents. Concerning the lagging problems of shrinking rural areas, the government has made financial investments and provided policy incentives to improve the ability to

develop depopulated communities. The creation of local life circles established the idea of sharing resources between urban and rural areas at a larger scale. An endogenous development concept with a bottom-up approach—stressing the competence, capacities, and capabilities of towns and regions—was emphasized in the implementation approach.

In South Korea, a series of policies, from the Rural Town Development Project to the Central Area Development Project, have contributed to the overall improvement of both the built environment and economic activities in towns and villages. These projects aimed to mitigate the gap between urban and rural areas by developing rural centers, improving the rural environment, and valorizing local characteristics. Although, generally, bottom-up participation in the development of South Korean villages and towns is not as well developed as in Japan, top-down support by a combination of state and local governments is relatively systematic. The ongoing encouragement of Returning to Farming and Villages has already had a major positive impact on the revival of rural areas. According to the KOSIS statistics, the rural population in towns and villages gradually increased in the last few years, mainly due to the growing opportunities for economic activities and better living environments in rural areas.

Unlike Japan and South Korea, China is still experiencing higher levels of urbanization and modernization. Although it is estimated that China's urbanization growth rate will slow down by 0.4–0.5% from the current rate [57], the overall trend of rural depopulation will continue. Given the enormous size of the population and huge regional disparities, the challenges and problems resulting from rural shrinkage are more complex, requiring even more caution, as well as proactive government intervention. China is taking steps to contribute to healthy and sustainable rural development by strengthening the central functions of rural towns and counties, improving public facility provisions, promoting urban-rural integration development, and increasing the social welfare of rural residents [58]. Reforms of the land management and transaction system, the rural housing system, and the fiscal distribution system to enhance urban-rural mobilities are being carefully explored. With the growth of modern information technology, mobile internet, and online economy, more endogenous development approaches have provided unprecedented opportunities and alternative options for the future development of shrinking rural areas.

6.2. Discussions

Objectively, the social policy system itself cannot completely reverse the macro trend of rural shrinkage. However, the ongoing practices in East Asian countries have gradually established a comprehensive social policy system that strengthens both external support and endogenous growth in response to rural shrinkage. Overall, it should be acknowledged that population policy objectives interrelate very closely with other policy objectives. Therefore, a holistic approach is required to cope with rural depopulation challenges. In East Asia, on the one hand, social policies aim to strengthen the infrastructure and welfare provision in shrinking areas and build local cultural self-confidence; on the other hand, they aim to integrate the shrinking areas into the wider urban-rural network, by encouraging more population flow and resource sharing. Continuous social policies have played a role in adjusting and bridging the urban-rural relationship in general terms.

The purpose of this article is to promote the international comparative study of social policies in response to rural shrinkage. Recently, East Asian countries have been facing the prospect of an end to their modern expansion and the emergence of a post-growth society and economy. Other Asia-Pacific countries—such as Thailand, Malaysia, and New Zealand—may follow [6]. Meanwhile, rural shrinkage has also been interpreted as part of wider trends in European territorial restructuring. A careful study of how economic and demographic changes interact and of the responsive measures and policies in present-day Asia will provide essential knowledge for responding to similar circumstances in other parts of Asia and beyond in the decades to come. Since this paper has taken three neighboring countries as examples, future researchers are encouraged to include countries with different

social traditions and forms of government, in order to substantiate the opinions made and propose suggestions that are applicable on a worldwide scale.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, W.L. and L.Z.; methodology and investigation, L.Z. and I.L.; resources, L.Z., I.L. and M.G.; writing-original draft preparation, W.L. and L.Z.; writing-review and editing, all authors; visualization, W.L.; project administration, L.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Tongji University Theory Innovation Project “Basic theory innovation of rural habitat” under smart shrinkage orientation.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the colleagues for their guidance and assistance in the investigations, including Min Zhao from Tongji University, China, Tomoya Kaji from Meiji Gakuin University, Japan, and student Yuxin Bai for collecting the original materials. Our thanks would also be given to five anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and to editors for their great contributions in the final revision. Any mistakes or omissions remain our own.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Grasland, C.; Ysebaert, R.; Corminboeuf, B.; Gaubert, N.; Lambert, N.; Salmon, I.; Baron, M.; Baudet-Michel, S.; Ducom, E.; Rivière, D.; et al. *Shrinking Regions: A Paradigm Shift in Demography and Territorial Development*; Study for Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policy, European Parliament; European Parliament: Brussels, Belgium, 2008. Available online: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL-REGI_ET\(2008\)408928](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL-REGI_ET(2008)408928) (accessed on 22 April 2023).
- Li, Y.H.; Westlund, H.; Liu, Y.S. Why some rural areas decline while some others not: An overview of rural evolution in the world. *J. Rural Stud.* **2019**, *68*, 135–143. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dax, T.; Copus, A.; Kahila, P.; Fritsch, M.; Kovács, K.; Tagai, G.; Weber, R.; Grunfelder, J.; Löfving, L.; Moodie, J.; et al. European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance; ESPON 2020 Project ESCAPE Main Report. 2020. Available online: <https://www.espon.eu/sites/default/files/attachments/ESPON%20ESCAPE%20Main%20Final%20Report.pdf> (accessed on 22 April 2023).
- Makkonen, T.; Inkinen, T. Benchmarking the vitality of shrinking rural regions in Finland. *J. Rural Stud.* **2023**, *97*, 334–344. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Battino, S.; Lampreu, S. The role of the sharing economy for a sustainable and innovative development of rural areas: A case study in Sardinia (Italy). *Sustainability* **2019**, *11*, 3004. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Matanle, P.C. Understanding the dynamics of regional growth and shrinkage in 21st century Japan: Towards the achievement of an Asia-Pacific ‘Depopulation Dividend’. In *Social Inequality in Post-Growth Japan: Transformation during Economic and Demographic Stagnation*; Chiavacci, D., Hommerich, C., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2016; ISBN 9781138638983.
- Zhang, Y. Post-modernized agriculture and rural community in East Asia: Case Studies of Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. *J. Nanjing Agric. Univ. (Soc. Sci. Ed.)* **2011**, *11*, 1–8.
- Wirth, P.; Elis, V.; Müller, B.; Yamamoto, K. Peripheralisation of small towns in Germany and Japan—Dealing with economic decline and population loss. *J. Rural Stud.* **2016**, *47*, 62–75. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zhao, M.; Lee, I.H. Evolving urban-rural development, dilemmas and policy agendas: Lessons from Korea and Japan. *Dev. Small Cities Towns* **2018**, *4*, 62–69.
- Feldhoff, T. Shrinking communities in Japan: Community ownership of assets as a development potential for rural Japan? *Urban Des. Int.* **2013**, *18*, 99–109. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Zhao, M.; You, L.; Chen, C. Smart shrinkage of rural human settlements and its planning strategies. *City Plan. Rev.* **2015**, *39*, 9–18.
- Shen, Q.P. The origin of evolution and policy direction of the social policy for rural vitalization in Korea. *J. China Agric. Univ. (Soc. Sci.)* **2021**, *10*, 49–57.
- Matanle, P.; Sato, Y. Coming soon to a city near you! learning to live ‘beyond growth’ in Japan’s shrinking regions. *Soc. Sci. Jpn. J.* **2010**, *13*, 187–210. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hashimoto, A.; Telfer, D.; Telfer, S. Life beyond growth? Rural depopulation becoming the attraction in Nagoro, Japan’s scarecrow village. *J. Herit. Tour.* **2021**, *16*, 493–512. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Daly, M. Governance and social policy. *J. Soc. Policy* **2003**, *32*, 113–128. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Norio, O. Rethinking Japan’s depopulation problem: Reflecting on over 30 years of research with Chizu Town, Tottori Prefecture and the potential of SMART Governance. *Contemp. Jpn.* **2022**, *34*, 210–227.

17. Naoko, M.; Hiroko, A. Japan: Super-aging society preparing for the future. *Gerontol.* **2011**, *51*, 425–432.
18. Joo, Y.M.; Seo, B. Dual policy to fight urban shrinkage: Daegu, South Korea. *Cities* **2018**, *73*, 128–137. [[CrossRef](#)]
19. Zhang, L. Rural Revitalization: Introductions for rural planning and development in East Asia. *Urban. Plan. Int.* **2016**, *31*, 1–7. [[CrossRef](#)]
20. Bock, B.B.; Haartsen, T. Who is afraid of population decline? the struggle of keeping rural depopulation on the Dutch agenda. *J. Depopul. Rural Dev. Stud.* **2021**, *33*, 35–56.
21. Liu, Y.; Zang, Y.; Yang, Y. China's rural revitalization and development: Theory, technology and management. *J. Geogr. Sci.* **2020**, *30*, 1923–1942. [[CrossRef](#)]
22. Lee, I.H. Change of rural development policy in South Korea after Korean War. *J. Reg. City Plan.* **2021**, *32*, 130–149.
23. Kenichiro, O. Genkai Shuraku (Marginal Village in Japan). In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*; Wiley: Hoboken, NJ, USA, 2020; pp. 1–4.
24. Tomoya, K. Land use policy and community development at the shrinking stage of Japan. *Meiji Gakuin Law J.* **2021**, *111*, 21–47.
25. Hirokazu, S. Regional problems and community responses in hilly and mountainous areas. *Ann. Econ. Geogr.* **2006**, *52*, 264–282.
26. Hu, H.; Zhang, J. Rural planning transformation and governance innovation from the perspective of beyond smart shrinkage: International experience and local exploration. *Urban Plan. Int.* **2022**, *37*, 50–58.
27. Hoshiori, N. A Study on maintenance of village functions and sustainability of residents' livelihoods in "limited villages": From the case of m village, hinohara village, Nishitama district, Tokyo. *E-J. GEO* **2009**, *1*, 21–36.
28. Shin, M.W.; Kim, B.H.S. The Effect of Direct Payment on the Prevention of Farmland Abandonment: The Case of the Hokkaido Prefecture in Japan. *Sustainability* **2020**, *12*, 334. [[CrossRef](#)]
29. Lintz, G.; Wirth, P. The importance of Leitbilder for structural change in small towns. In *Guiding Principles for Spatial Development in Germany*; Strubelt, W., Ed.; German Annual of Spatial Research and Policy; Springer: Berlin, Germany, 2008; pp. 75–95.
30. Zhang, L.; Bai, Y.X.; Pang, L. The research progress and prospect of small town development and planning in China since 2000. *Urban Rural Plan* **2022**, *1*, 61–85.
31. Courtney, P.; Mayfield, L.; Tranter, R.; Jones, P.; Errington, A. Small towns as 'sub-poles' in English rural development: Investigating rural–urban linkages using sub-regional social accounting matrices. *Geoforum* **2007**, *38*, 1219–1232. [[CrossRef](#)]
32. Tong, Y.; Liu, W.; Li, C.; Rong, Y.; Zhang, J.; Yang, Y.; Yan, Q.; Gao, S.; Liu, Y. County town shrinkage in China: Identification, spatiotemporal variations and the heterogeneity of influencing factors. *J. Rural Stud.* **2022**, *95*, 350–361. [[CrossRef](#)]
33. Zhang, L. Evolution, Characteristics and extended meanings of Chinese distinctive towns policy. *Urban Rural Plan* **2017**, *6*, 24–32.
34. Garcilazo, E.; Springare, L.; Sasaki, M.; Diana, O.; Higuera, D. *Rural study of Korea*; OECD Regional Development Working Papers; OECD Publishing: Paris, France, 2019.
35. Tokuda, M.; Tomokiyo, T. The degree of connectivity between municipalities based on the composing situation of facility and service sphere: Study on the method of sphere establishment on the coordination between living sphere and consolidation of municipalities. In *Summaries of Technical Papers of Annual Meeting, Architectural Institute of Japan*; Architectural Institute of Japan: Tokyo, Japan, 2005; pp. 407–408.
36. Ito, K. Community Reorganization through Sports and the "Sphere of Daily Life" Based on a Case of Tarumi-ku, Kobe in Japan. *Akita Univ. Rep.* **2016**, *71*, 61–70.
37. Jeong, J. *A Study on the Performance Analysis of Local Happiness Rights Policy*; Report from the Local Development Committee; Local Development Committee: Seoul, Republic of Korea, 2017.
38. Jaeheun, S. *A Study on Regional Development Policy Promotion Plan According to the Change of Settlement Space in the Rural Area in the Future*; Korea Rural Economic Institute (KREI): Naju, Republic of Korea, 2017.
39. Dilley, L.; Gkartzios, M.; Odagiri, T. Developing counterurbanisation: Making sense of rural mobility and governance in Japan. *Habitat Int.* **2022**, *125*, 102595. [[CrossRef](#)]
40. Atterton, J.; Dilley, L.; Fukushima, C.; Shinzato, S.; Gkartzios, M.; Lamont, K. Approaches to Island Depopulation in Japan and Lessons for Scotland Final Report. Scottish Government. 2022. Available online: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/approaches-island-depopulation-japan-lessons-scotland/> (accessed on 8 June 2023).
41. Shen, Q.P. Implications of the implementation of the policy support system of "returning to farmers and villages" in Korea for the development of human capital in rural China. *World Agric.* **2019**, *486*, 53–60.
42. Yu, K.; Wei, W.; Yang, J.; Zhao, W. Reflection on and model construction of talent returning cultivation mechanism based on rural revitalization: A case study of the "returning to farmers and villages" program in South Korea. *Urban Plan. Int.* **2023**, *38*, 24–30+47.
43. Chan, K.W.; Zhang, L. The Hukou system and rural-urban migration in China: Processes and changes. *China Q.* **1999**, *160*, 818–855. [[CrossRef](#)] [[PubMed](#)]
44. Shi, X.; Gao, X.; Fang, S. Land system reform in rural China: Path and mechanism. *Land* **2022**, *11*, 1241. [[CrossRef](#)]
45. Deininger, K.; Jin, S.; Liu, S.; Xia, F. Property rights reform to support China's rural–urban integration: Household-level evidence from the Chengdu experiment. *Aust. J. Agric. Resour. Econ.* **2020**, *64*, 30–54. [[CrossRef](#)]
46. Gkartzios, M.; Lowe, P. Revisiting neo-endogenous rural development. In *The Routledge Companion to Rural Planning*; Scott, M., Gallent, N., Gkartzios, M., Eds.; Routledge: London, UK; New York, NY, USA, 2019; pp. 159–169.
47. OECD. *The New Rural Paradigm—Policies and Governance*; OECD: Paris, France, 2016.
48. Gkartzios, M.; Gallent, N.; Scott, M. *Rural Places and Planning: Stories from the Global Countryside*; Policy Press: Bristol, UK, 2022.

49. Lee, I.H.; Zhang, L. The Factors for Success of Saemaeul Undong and Its New Agenda. *Urban Plan. Int.* **2016**, *31*, 8–14. [[CrossRef](#)]
50. KREI. *Rural Policy Overview in Korea*; Korea Rural Economic Institute (KREI): Naju, Republic of Korea, 2019.
51. Wang, Y.; Huang, Y.; Zhang, Y. Coupling and coordinated development of digital economy and rural revitalisation and analysis of influencing factors. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 3779. [[CrossRef](#)]
52. Li, Z.; Liu, J. Evolution Process and Characteristics of Multifactor Flows in Rural Areas: A Case Study of Licheng Village in Hebei, China. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 3225. [[CrossRef](#)]
53. Tanigaki, M. A quantitative analysis of factors affecting migration to disappearing local municipalities in Japan. *J. Rural Plan.* **2008**, *36*, 554–561. [[CrossRef](#)]
54. Hisano, S.; Akitsu, M.; McGreevy, S.R. Revitalising rurality under the neoliberal transformation of agriculture: Experiences of re-agrarianisation in Japan. *J. Rural Stud.* **2018**, *61*, 290–301. [[CrossRef](#)]
55. Bogdański, M.; Janusz, M. Small towns' functions as a determinant of the standard of living in rural areas—An example from Poland. *Sustainability* **2022**, *14*, 13254. [[CrossRef](#)]
56. Peters, D.; Hamideh, S.; Zarecor, K.; Ghandour, M. Using entrepreneurial social infrastructure to understand smart shrinkage in small towns. *J. Rural Stud.* **2018**, *64*, 39–49. [[CrossRef](#)]
57. Wei, H.K.; Nian, M.; Li, L. China's regional development strategy and policy during the 14th Five-Year Plan period. *China Ind. Econ.* **2020**, *5*, 5–22. [[CrossRef](#)]
58. Li, W.Q.; Zhang, L.; Zhang, S.W. A review on main research issues of urban-rural integration in China and the future prospect. *Urban Plan. Forum* **2022**, *6*, 36–43.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.