

The Promised Land

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Based on my experience during the exchange program in 2017, I would like to write about issues that rural areas in Japan and the U.S. face.

In Tokyo, I worked as a designer for commercial buildings and facilities for more than 10 years. In January 1995, in the midst of a *Heisei*-era recession, I returned to my hometown in a rural area. Several days later, the Great Hanshin Earthquake struck Kobe and its surrounding area.

After I returned to my hometown, I became involved with the revitalization of rural communities. I felt that this was work that needed to be done, and in 2001, I started a NPO to revitalize the rural community in which I lived. I have been working in this field for 15 years now. The Japanese government has recognized our work as a role model for others trying to do the same.

Last year, thanks to the exchange program organized by Japan Society (NY) and Japan NPO Center (Tokyo), I traveled to rural communities in the U.S. It was suggested that we might want to read *Hillbilly Elegy* to prepare for the trip. My first trip to the U.S. took place more than 30 years ago when everything in the U.S. looked so rosy compared to Japan. However when I was in the U.S. in 2017, I could sense that something wasn't quite right.

During my stay, I sensed a decline that was quietly seeping through the internal social structure. None of this had to do with diplomacy or the economy. Something similar is happening in Japan today. Resolving one or two social issues will not solve the decline in both countries. It's not that simple. In cities and in rural areas, the fundamental structure of the society is destabilized. The challenge is enormous and complex. The common challenge that we see in the U.S. and in Japan derives from a weariness in society. Revitalizing rural areas will not solve everything.

Cities are growing and rural areas are shrinking. I think we need to define what would make an optimal-sized community. What is the right size? What qualities are needed for an optimal-sized community?

We probably only scratched the surface when we visited the U.S. last year. The issues that rural areas face are much deeper than what we could see in a limited amount of time. In Japan, there is a gap between coastal cities and inland areas. There is an emergence of a new class structure. Rural communities, farming, forestry, and fishing villages are disappearing. There is transgenerational poverty. We see that the structure and worldview discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* is now appearing in cities and rural areas within the same country. People have a clear sense of this class system. It's a strange structure—a caste system that is hiding under a

layer of democracy. In this structure, it feels as if people living in a high tower are looking down on those below them.

To tackle the issues that society faces, it is essential to revitalize regional communities. But it's important to stay strategic. First of all, I think we have to figure out what kind of community we want. Professor Randy Cantrell at the University of Nebraska has been exploring the same topics that I have been looking into.

- What is the optimal size of a community and the qualities needed to make human beings happiest?
- What is the optimal size? A community that is not so big that it feels empty and not so small it feels suffocating.

Without a North Star, no matter what we do, we will be on a voyage without a compass, drifting aimlessly. If we revitalize a community without a goal, we won't go anywhere. If we can figure out a basic definition for an optimal-sized community, this can lead to guidelines that Americans and Japanese can use to tackle issues faced by developed nations.

When you live in an excessively crowded city, people start to blend into the background. They are no longer seen as human beings and become more of a commodity. Relations with others are easily disrupted. Living in a gigantic city, you may have limited relations with others and any relations you have could be tribal. In that context, life in a big city may feel similar to living in the wilderness where the wild animals are increasingly aggressive. We can then see these isolated individuals act on their hatred, which is not motivated by religion or ideology.

In rural areas where communities are shrinking, the people with power stay on and start behaving like "small" dictators. Young people who are tired of the confined environment and "jail-like panopticon" (Foucault) move to urban areas. This accelerates the hypertrophy of the city. The distortion caused by a "small" dictatorship leads to terror due to individual hatred.

This is why it's important to design a community that is neither big nor small, but an optimal size. This issue will become more relevant, for example, when rural towns and villages start disappearing and the remaining towns are run by "small" dictatorial leaders. Families living in the cities who want to get away from the ever-expanding urban areas may not be able to find a desirable place to go. City dwellers will have nowhere to go in the future. When a nation goes through stratification, citizens will no longer share a common language. They may speak the same language but they will no longer understand each other. It will be as if everyone lives in the Tower of Babel. The country will face a slow death and gradually disintegrate into pieces. This is a rather scary scenario, but it could happen.

To avoid this gloomy scenario, it would be a good idea to propose a U.S. -Japan joint research project to define the optimal-sized community. A work like this can be useful to other weary developed nations facing the same predicament. When there is an optimal-sized community,

"little narratives" (Lyotard) start to emerge. Exploring the optimal-sized community is a grand topic, not a little one.

I visited the Czech Republic several years ago and learned about the system of micro regions. This system was not based on the science of an optimal-sized community. It was a way to receive subsidies, and the micro regions could only grow with the subsidies. The name was great, but unfortunately had no meaning. This makes me realize that there aren't any examples of optimal-sized communities. And it's an area that has not been sufficiently examined.

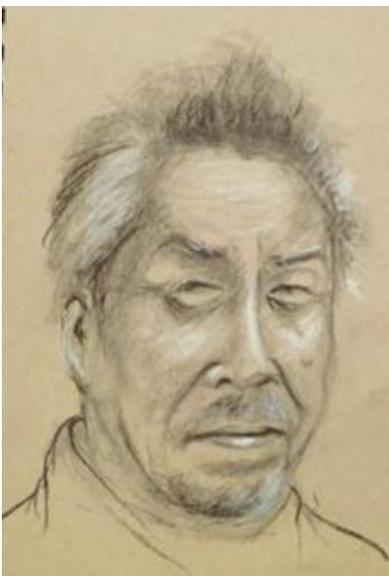


During the program last year, I didn't buy any souvenirs except a sticker from the University of Nebraska. It cost about \$6.50. I really liked it and put it above the gas cap door of my car.

The car is not in good condition, and is ready to be scrapped. I am sad that I will lose the sticker; I like it a lot. I would like my American friends to look at the photo. It's the Sea of Japan. Beyond the sea are North Korea, China, and Russia, about which we read a lot about in the news these days. The sunset is beautiful.

Chuck Schroeder, the Executive Director of Rural Futures Institute at the University of Nebraska, drew two portraits of me. He is so talented. Thank you, Chuck!

(Portraits of Sekihara by Chuck Schroeder)



The state of Nebraska is half the size of Japan. The land is mostly flat and farmland. I heard that Nebraska means "flat water" in a Native American language. It indicates that there is a major subterranean river. In other words, Nebraska is more of a lake or a sea.

Water is necessary for survival. Nebraska is a good land. I would never call it a fly-over state. There are many rural areas in Japan and the U.S. that are rich in resources.

It's hard to see these things when you live in a big city. These places are not very visible. In the meantime, people lose the ability to find good land. I would like to say that good land is the Promised Land. I think that leaders from the U.S. and Japan are at the beginning of a journey to rediscover the value of the Promised Land, which has become invisible due to urbanization.