The impact of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers on processes of peripherisation in Japan’s mountain villages

Volker ELIS
Research Fellow, University of Tübingen

Abstract
The Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers impacted on the peripherisation of mountain villages in Japan. Through structured analysis of the effects of the two reforms, this article draws on theories from recent discourse on peripherisation in Germany and applies the framework to a Japanese context. The two reforms are treated as interrelated measures in line with the neoliberal reform agenda of the Koizumi administration. By examination of cause-effect relations, the article assesses induced changes in terms of the four dimensions of peripherisation—outmigration, disconnection, dependency, and negative perception. It concludes that the two regional policy reforms led to a further peripherisation of mountain villages in respect of all four facets, albeit to a varying extent and with different implications. Circumstances in many mountain villages can already be deemed critical due to the challenges of demographic change; these are exacerbated by the need to consolidate local finances and the effects of municipal amalgamation. Factors contributing to further peripherisation of mountain villages include a lower level of public service provision, infrastructure cutbacks, the loss of administrative independence, restrictions of policy options of local governments and the weakening of local identity. Paradoxically, the reforms originally aimed at devolution of power to local governments but could now lead to heightened importance of lobbying for funds from central government.

Key words: mountain villages, peripherisation, demographic change, Trinity Reforms, Heisei Mergers

I Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine how two recent regional policy reforms—the Trinity Reforms (sanmi ittai kaikaku) and the Heisei Mergers (Heisei dai gappei)—contributed to increased peripherisation of mountain villages in Japan. The research methodology used here derived from discourse on peripherisation in German-language publications originally developed to explain rural decline in regions of eastern Germany after the reunification in 1990.

The motivation to transpose a research model originally from another country to circumstances in rural Japan came from the general impression that phenomena evolving in the course of rural decline take a similar shape, involve comparable mechanisms and could well be traced back to the same causes in the case of both Japan and Germany. Assuming this were
The impact of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers on processes of peripherisation in Japan’s mountain villages

correct, it would follow to analyse patterns of rural ‘shrinkage’ or rural decline as well as typical policy responses to these developments from an international and comparative perspective. In this case, research on the topic of rural decline could benefit from both a comparison of the processes in terms of content, as well as a comparison in terms of methodology and research methods. While the application of a relatively new and still evolving German research approach to a Japanese issue could be considered a rather bold venture, it could yield findings that put rural development in Japan into a new perspective and could potentially stimulate the international exchange of ideas in the field of rural studies.

My interest in the effects of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers on rural municipalities in Japan originated in a comprehensive research project into the impact of demographic change on rural areas of Japan and particular policies adopted by local governments to cope with the challenge (Elis 2008), (Elis 2011). The project produced several findings e. g. that despite increasing pressure to act, local governments were afforded little leeway and their undertakings were severely restricted by the requirements of the two above-mentioned regional policy reforms. Interviews and fieldwork research in case study mountain villages gave reason for this conclusion. This then gave rise to the question as to whether these two reforms contributed to further peripherisation of mountain villages in Japan, exacerbating the symptoms of peripherisation caused by demographic change. Throughout the paper the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers are treated as two interconnected measures that reflect the same political ideology and serve complementary purposes.

The paper focuses on the cause–effect relations leading to further peripherisation of mountain villages with regard to the following four dimensions: outmigration, disconnection, dependency and negative perception (Bernt et al. 2010, 9–13). The objective is to investigate underlying mechanisms and the scope of the impact of the two regional policy reforms. Furthermore, parallels are drawn to comparable developments in the context of post-unification Germany where appropriate. Finally, the results of the analysis are used to make proposals to modify the existing theory of peripherisation.

II Discourse on peripherisation in Germany since 2006

Understanding the term ‘peripherisation’

Interest in the phenomenon of peripherisation in Germany was revived from the need to create an adequate theoretical framework to analyse socio-economic decline in regions of the former Democratic Republic of Germany after the reunification in 1990. It also became necessary in the context of the challenges of demographic change.

Discourse on peripherisation was ignited by an influential essay by Keim (2006) proposing a new awareness of the term ‘peripherisation.’ In his essay, ‘peripherisation’ was used as a term applied to socio-spatial processes with a less static meaning than previously. Keim rejected the notion of peripheral areas as fixed and unchanging subjects by emphasizing the dynamic connotation and the temporal dimensions of peripherisation. Hence, priority in the discourse shifted from mere specification of peripheral areas in a territorial or cartographic sense by boundary-drawing (Keim 2006, 3–4) to an analysis of the socio-economic and demographic causes of peripherisation. Subsequent research adopted this approach, reemphasising the assertion that peripheral spaces are not static but constructed (Bernt et al. 2010, 2). This means that peripheral regions are not eternally condemned to this status, a fact that is proven by the existence of
“peripheral climbers” (Bernt et al. 2010, 8). One factor remained unchanged from previous research studies, namely that peripherisation is viewed as a complement to centralisation. According to Keims (2006, 3–4) peripheral areas are characterised by a disconnection from the dominant processes of centralisation and a gradual weakening of economic potential with regard to production and employment.

The description and analysis of the processes of peripherisation can be facilitated by the four-dimensional concept of peripherisation: disconnection, outmigration, dependency and negative self-perception (Bernt et al. 2010, 2). Keim touched on the dimension of ‘disconnection’ in an economic sense and this was then adopted by the sociologist Beetz, who expanded on it by including the aspect of disconnection from political decision-making structures. Beetz also introduced ‘outmigration’ and ‘dependency’ as additional features of the periphery (Beetz 2007, 228–229), (Beetz 2008, 7; 11–13), drawing on the context of the centre–periphery model. Finally Bernt et al. (2010, 12–13) added the fourth dimension: ‘negative self-perception’.

Applying the theoretical framework to Japan

The theoretical discourse into peripherisation will now be applied to the context of Japan in order to investigate the extent of peripherisation in towns affected by recent regional policy reforms. The deliberations are loosely based on findings acquired during research stints in three rural towns in Japan: Ani in Akita prefecture, Koza in Wakayama prefecture and Ōya in Hyōgo prefecture (see Eliz 2011). All three towns fall into the category of mountain villages (sanson) and are classified as underpopulated areas (kaso chiiki). The population ranges from three to six thousand and all three towns have been significantly affected by demographic change and population decline and marked population ageing. The original objective of my fieldwork in these towns was to study the impact of demographic change on the local economy and society and to analyse the policy responses of local governments, nonetheless this included the effect of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers as well, since their effects exerted a strong influence on the choice of policy responses. The towns of Ani, Koza and Ōya are not used in this paper as case study areas in the real sense, but serve as a rough orientation point for further considerations and assessments as examples for peripheral towns. In the three towns in rural Japan, I was able to observe signs of peripherisation similar to circumstances in rural towns in eastern Germany. This sparked an interest in the issue of effects of two regional policy reforms: the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers. All three towns were subject to administrative mergers, losing their independence as a municipality. The task at hand now became to draw comparisons between the towns prior to the mergers and afterwards, in order to assess the negative or positive extent of peripherisation.

The Trinity Reforms

A central part of the neo-liberal reform agenda of the Koizumi administration (from 2001 to 2006) was the Trinity Reform Programme. These reforms effected major changes in Japanese regional policy. Their principal aim was reduction of central and local government debt. The plan was to achieve the goal through reorganisation of local government finance, devolution of public responsibilities and decentralisation. The reform package for local government finance was founded on the basis of three pillars: cuts to local allocation tax grants (chihō kōfuzei), reduction in central government disbursements (kokko shishutsukin) and the transfer of additional tax income resources to local governments.
The first two components of the reforms reflected the objective of reducing the burden of the intergovernmental finance system on the national budget. The third component can be viewed as a means of compensating local governments for the loss in income resulting from the changes in income redistribution. In theory, the reforms aimed to increase responsibilities and incentives to local governments for independent policy-making; hence they acquired the label of a decentralisation policy. In one of his speeches, Koizumi affirmed the importance of “enhancing the autonomy of localities and expansion of their discretionary capabilities” and insisted upon “leaving to the localities what they can do” (OCPRCS 2004). These statements can be taken at face value and interpreted as a simple confirmation of Koizumi’s commitment to decentralisation, by empowering the self-governing bodies and assigning them more responsibilities. However, they could also be interpreted as an announcement of a new regional policy stance characterised by the expectation that local governments should fend for themselves rather than depending on support by the central government.

For peripheral municipalities this entailed bad news, since they tend to be highly dependent on fiscal transfers from central government and these would be cut as part of the reforms. Potential income gains by newly awarded tax sources could hardly be seen as adequate compensation for the loss of income that peripheral towns and villages would suffer from a reduction in local allocation tax grants and central government disbursements. Cuts in transfers from national government exceeded the additional income accrued by local authorities from the allocation of new tax sources. Moreover, the demographic circumstances of peripheral municipalities also turned out to their disadvantage, because they faced population decline and an imbalanced age structure with a high percentage of senior citizens. Both characteristics tend to reduce income from per capita taxes. This meant that peripheral towns and villages had to reckon with less financial means to cope in the short-term. At a time when a reliable income supply was particularly necessary to enable these towns to cope with the new challenges of demographic change and provide public services to the elderly, they were hit by the prospect of substantial income losses due to the Trinity Reforms (Lützeler and Elis 2007, 717). In anticipation of increased financial insecurity over and above additional challenges linked to the effects of demographic change on the local economies, many peripheral municipalities were forced to search for partners to form larger municipal units; these would potentially cope with the task of fiscal consolidation. Of the motivating factors for municipalities participating in administrative mergers, one of the most important was justified concern about the future financial circumstances of municipalities (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2009, 1). This important link between the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers is reason enough to address the effects of both regional policy reforms in this paper.

The Heisei Mergers

The Trinity Reforms contributed to the success of the Heisei Mergers. This political initiative for municipal amalgamation achieved a 46.5% reduction from 3232 municipalities in 1999 to 1728 municipalities by the end of March 2010, at which point the measure was altered in line with the revision of the New Merger Law. The administrative mergers reached their peak in the fiscal years 2003 to 2005 when local authorities rushed to participate before the option of benefitting from special merger bonds (gappei tokurei-sai) expired.

The objective of the mergers had been to reduce the number of municipalities and to improve administrative efficiency through municipal expansion, the idea being that devolution of power
was to be promoted. The mergers were eventually driven by a carrot-and-stick approach, whereby possible benefits from special merger bonds served as a positive incentive. However, the mergers failed to gain momentum until a decrease in the amount of local allocation tax grants incurred increased pressure on financially weak municipalities. Those municipalities faced dire financial circumstances and were confronted with the choice between participation in the mergers or bankruptcy (Aoki 2006, 7–9). The intended decrease of local allocation tax grants without compensation or gradual adjustment announced for the fiscal year 2004 turned out to be a substantial shock for local administrative bodies. The cuts were particularly severe on small municipalities with a population of less than ten thousand. The smaller the population of the respective municipality, the more serious the problems this caused (Imai 2008, 51–52). The connection between the new neoliberal approach towards regional policy is apparent in the reduction of local allocation tax grants and the political will to facilitate the mergers. However, this has never been explicitly stated by the main political actors and remains unclear to some extent. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that the connection between the adjustment of the intergovernmental finance system and the promotion of the Heisei Mergers was intended by decision-makers in central government.

In cases where a small municipality successfully found one or more suitable partners (something that was not always guaranteed), the community lost its administrative independence but temporarily shed its financial problems. Joining a newly formed municipal unit meant that financial risks could be pooled and provided the mayor of the now enlarged municipality with the opportunity to adjust local policy to its obligation to stabilise local finances. Enlarged municipalities were given a moratorium period of ten years during which a level of local allocation tax grants would be maintained; the level corresponded to the sum of the transfer payments the participating municipalities would have received had they retained their independence. At the end of the ten-year period, the reforms proposed an adjustment period of another five years when the level of local allocation tax grants would be reduced until they reached their final lower level. That meant that municipalities created or enlarged by a merger were pressed to act quickly in order to avoid bankruptcy and avoid the risk of a future with fewer financial resources. This partly explains the strong drive of many municipalities to increase the efficiency of local administration.

A typical policy stance was characterised by ‘small government’, cost-cutting measures and the aim of realising synergy effects to pursue the aim of financial consolidation. This was to be achieved by a reduction of local government staff, downsizing infrastructure and reassessing municipal projects and ventures with a view to potential privatisation or discontinuation. The rationale behind infrastructure cutbacks was a reduction in redundancies in public institutions and facilities; these would tend to increase as the areas faced ongoing depopulation and population ageing. Cutbacks in infrastructure included the closure or consolidation of schools, the closure or capacity-reduction of municipal hospitals and adjustments in public transport. Towns that became the administrative centres of new or enlarged municipalities after the merger could benefit from these processes due to the tendency to favour a concentration of infrastructure at one central location.

III The impact of the two reforms on the different aspects of peripherisation

Outmigration
The depopulation of mountain villages in Japan can be viewed as a process that has endured
since the period of high economic growth, albeit with various causes and to a varying extent. The rates of population decline reached a peak during the period of high economic growth as a result of substantial outmigration of members of the younger age groups to urban areas. Once the economy had entered a period of stable growth, the decline in population slowed down considerably, but rose again slightly during the second half of the 1980s. This can be viewed as a consequence of natural population loss, itself a long-term effect of outmigration in the 1960s, since it left its mark on the population structure of mountain villages (Nishino 2004, 204). After 1990 the rate of population decline showed a renewed slight decrease while the ageing process persisted. The proportion of the population of mountain villages that is 65 years or over is much higher than the national average and the population is also negatively affected by an accelerated ageing process.

Even the brief explanations provided above should demonstrate that — in the case of Japanese mountain villages — it is necessary to collectively examine the following factors: the balance of births and deaths, structural changes in population and net migration in order to provide a clear picture of the role that demographic factors play in peripherisation processes. Limiting enquiry merely to the factor of outmigration would risk missing the point in the case of mountain villages in Japan. Further to this, the evolving theory of peripherisation stands to gain from modification of the analysis model to include the following factors: the ageing process of the population, natural population movement and the balancing factor of immigration. In this respect, it is worthwhile considering depopulation as a consequence of outmigration and as a distinct historical phase in the development of Japanese mountain villages which was only then succeeded by a phase characterised by peripherisation (shiben-ka) (Okahashi 2004a, 110). However, this view does not necessarily contradict the objective of this paper to explore outmigration as an effect rather than a cause.

Now to the question as to how the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers could have influenced the process of peripherisation in mountain villages with particular regard to the dimension ‘outmigration.’ In marked contrast to the other three dimensions treated below it is not easy to come up with obvious chains of causes and effects that could lead to aggravated peripherisation because of further outmigration brought about by the two regional policy reforms discussed here. One conceivable cause for a higher level of outmigration would be decline in public service provision. Infrastructure cutbacks can mean longer journeys to schools and hospitals, while the discontinuation of certain municipal projects can have a negative impact on the quality of life in mountain villages. It is possible to hypothesize about cases such as a family with children of elementary school age who turn their backs on their hometown because a school closes down or a frail elderly person dependent on medical care who is forced to move because the local hospital responsible for providing healthcare services is closed down. While such cases do occur, it seems less likely that they are typical phenomena of peripherisation and leave a significant mark on migration-related data. As the factor “outmigration” tends to restrict mobility to a certain extent, notably a high percentage of the average mountain village population is already 65 years or over. Outmigration as a response to tax increases is more likely to have an effect that is more than marginal; such outmigration is often motivated by even tighter local budget circumstances — with the local budget constrictions themselves caused by the need to stabilise the budget. Finally, outmigration might also occur as a consequence of the other three dimensions of peripherisation analysed below. In summary we can conclude that effects of the two regional policy reforms on outmigration from mountain villages are conceivable due to
various causes, nonetheless these are unlikely to rise substantially. Quantitative analysis of census data from 2005 and the still unpublished data from 2010 could be applied to good effect to confirm this assumption.

Disconnection
Processes of disconnection from dominant processes in central regions—typically coupled with aggravated forms of demographic change—can assume both an economic and an infrastructural dimension (Neu 2006, 15). Economic disconnection of peripheral regions is characterised by a weakening of economic capability and a loss of importance of rural regions in terms of production and employment (Keim 2006, 4). Furthermore, economic disconnection involves a lack of linkages to higher-ranking state and market systems in addition to enfeeblement in the field of innovative activities (Bernt et al. 2010, 10–11). Infrastructural disconnection, on the other hand, pivots around the issue of accessibility.

Disconnection in an economic sense often features in writings about the issues affecting non-metropolitan areas of Japan. Moreover, disconnection in an economic sense is mostly discussed in relation to the negative consequences of globalisation or the shortfall of jobs in knowledge-intensive industries (Yoshida 2005, 136–137). There is no doubt that involuntary economic disconnection affects mountain villages. Typically the communities there have no important roles to play in multi-national enterprise networks and are detached from the innovation dynamics of the knowledge industries. However, it appears that it is not possible to clearly identify the effects of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers on the state of local economies potentially further exacerbating economic disconnection. Consequently, the factor of economic disconnection requires no further attention here as it will probably remain largely unchanged.

The second type, infrastructural disconnection, provides us with quite a different picture to economic disconnection. To start with, we need to consider the initial circumstances of the mountain villages prior to the two reforms. The mountain villages of Japan tend to be located in areas remote from metropolitan areas and distant from regional cities. Before the period of high economic growth a lack of access routes was a serious problem, however it became possible to make considerable improvements by making substantial investments in road construction and maintenance programmes within the framework of the promotion measures for underpopulated areas (kaso chiiki) (Okahashi 2004a, 122–123). In addition to widening existing roads, road traffic connections were improved through widespread construction of tunnels and bridges (Nishino 2010, 63). In contrast to this, as a consequence of population decline in recent years, there has been a deterioration in the quality of public transport services. Passenger numbers fall, i.e. the customer base is shrinking and costs are rising, railway and bus routes and frequencies are taken out of service and reduced, creating severe problems for residents without a car, as well as the elderly and children. Another area worth mentioning with regard to the circumstances of underdeveloped mountain villages is the provision of modern information infrastructure (Okahashi 2004a, 123–124).

While the transport infrastructure is not necessarily in a poor condition in every mountain village and on the whole is sufficient to satisfy local transport needs, the regional policy reforms contribute both to deterioration of access routes and the provision of public transport. Under these conditions, two things happen concurrently: there are increased journeys times to hospitals, schools, and other public facilities as a result of cutbacks in infrastructure and as a result of the concentration of infrastructure in the administrative centres of the newly established
The impact of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers on processes of peripherisation in Japan’s mountain villages

municipalities and secondly pressure to cut costs in public transport mounts. In turn, this then affects cost calculations undertaken by local railway companies that are dependent on subsidies from local administrative bodies. Local railway lines struggle to survive because of a decline in passenger numbers due to population decline and competition with private transport; 80% of local railways are operating in the red (Nihon Keizai Shimbun 2008, 3). An important future task of policy makers will be to find a balance between the necessity to adjust the supply of public transport services to a lower level of demand and the need to maintain services for population groups dependent on access to public and private facilities.

Dependency

The third factor of peripherisation is dependency, characterised by a lack of autonomy and a lack of power. Dependency can pertain to the public sector and be characterised by dependency on transfers from the state in the form of financial equalisation scheme compensations or financial allocations. It is also found in the private sector, taking the form of subordinate roles and functions for plants and businesses located in peripheral regions within the networks of corporations and operations that are controlled from headquarters situated outside the region (Bernt et al. 2010, 12).

The dependency issue in mountain villages of Japan has already been analysed from the perspective of the centre-periphery debate in a study by Okahashi (1997). Okahashi deemed the dependency and lack of autonomy of local economies to be problematic despite the fact that improvements in regional employment have been achieved. As far as the dependency issue in the private sector is concerned, it is conspicuous that businesses in mountain villages play a subordinate role in the networks of big corporations. However, change for the worse is unlikely once the effects of the two regional policy reforms (analysed here) take hold.

To assess the extent of change in the autonomy issue in mountain villages since the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers, it would be valuable to adopt a perspective that also caters for political and administrative factors. The most obvious change, namely that many mountain villages lost administrative independence in the wake of the Heisei Mergers, requires consideration. Although local actors are still in a position to participate in new local government decision-making processes, it is clear that the pivot and central point of decision-making shifts to the town hall of the newly created municipality. With the attention now spread across a larger territory, the newly formed municipal unit inevitably struggles with similar issues to the amalgamated mountain villages, hence the question arises as to whether the interests and needs of mountain villages as a part of a new administrative unit will still be given due consideration (Okahashi 2004b, 248) or simply ignored for the benefit of the municipality as a whole.

Considering the second aspect of dependency, lack of power, it becomes important to differentiate between the original intentions of the regional policy reforms expressed in theory or in official documents and statements and between the outcome of the reforms manifested in the circumstances of mountain villages. In theory, the Trinity Reforms were intended as an instrument of policy to realize the goals of devolution and decentralisation; they were also intended to provide local governments with the powers to accept more responsibility. Devolution involves the central state granting power to subordinate administrative bodies, so the question arises: did local administrative bodies gain more power and responsibilities through the reforms? The transfer of additional tax sources certainly boosted the jurisdiction of local governments, but the Trinity Reforms tended to restrain their freedom to utilize local finances.
accrued because the reforms brought increased pressure to reduce costs and reorganise local finances. Dispassionate analysis of the balance of power in communities prior to and post-regional policy reforms demonstrates that potential power gains for local governments are severely restricted by the consequences of the two regional policy reforms because prospective options of action are overshadowed by the need to adjust budgeting to new financial conditions.

The Trinity Reforms and municipal amalgamation were widely heralded as a path to decentralisation and the devolution of power but in truth, they left municipalities in financial situations without much choice at all. As a consequence, far from being strengthened, local autonomy was actually diminished in most cases. Faced with the threat of bankruptcy and its inherent involuntary administration by central government, newly created or enlarged municipalities had no choice but to focus on fiscal consolidation as opposed to local revitalization. This meant that for rural areas in particular there is an acute need to act and ease the impact of demographic change, however local governments are unable to take appropriate steps. This aspect of peripherisation and the reforms would be worthy of discussion if there had been any power gain for local governments at all, however findings are indisputable: there was no power gain for the mountain villages forced into mergers with larger neighbours; moreover they lost their administrative independence as a consequence.

As well as the details mentioned above, the power issue involves another dimension, namely the power of rural actors to exert influence on national policy issues within the Japanese democracy. German studies of the peripherisation approach addressed the circumstances in declining rural regions of eastern post-unification Germany but the considerable lobbying power and political clout of rural actors in Japan sets it apart from the German model. It is essential to acknowledge three open points of enquiry: first, the mechanisms of how the rural vote brought about positive change in national policies affecting rural areas of Japan; second, how that rural vote influenced power constellations within and between political parties; third, the evolution of these mechanisms within a historical perspective. Nonetheless these questions cannot be covered within the limits of this article. Suffice to say, it does not seem appropriate to suppose a general lack of power in the case of actors from rural areas of Japan. The question requiring a response within this discussion is whether this is the case for actors from mountain villages in Japan.

It is fair to assume that the balance of power between local and national government is influenced by the two policy reforms to the disadvantage of rural local governments. Even if we assume that the population of newly established or enlarged cities and towns has grown, the question remains as to whether local actors from rural areas are in a position to employ their lobbying power to positively influence circumstances in their home municipality. The policy options of local governments are severely restricted by the two regional policy reforms, so it would seem reasonable for local actors to utilize their influence and concentrate their efforts to lobby for funds and subsidies from the national government. This could result in a situation where, as it becomes more and more important to effectively lobby for funds at responsible ministries, there is a demonstration of a tendency to neglect other options and strategies to revitalise mountain villages by using endogenous strategies or participatory approaches. It remains to be seen whether the original objectives of the Trinity Reforms (i.e. to reduce dependency of local government on central government in terms of transfer payments) can be achieved, in spite of the critical financial situation faced by many local governments.
The impact of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers on processes of peripherisation in Japan’s mountain villages

Negative Self-Perception

The last dimension of peripherisation that requires attention is the question as to how residents and non-residents perceive the particular mountain village. Here, it will be productive to shed light on research method in order to enable a view of the concept of peripherised spaces as socially constructed.

In the specific case of the peripherisation discourse in Germany, the issue of negative self-perception is discussed with an emphasis on stigmatization and marginalization of residents of rural areas; it arose from the tendency to use certain stereotyped labels to describe recent developments in the countryside e.g. ‘depletion’, ‘depopulation’, ‘over-ageing’ and ‘shrinkage’ (Bernt et al. 2010, 12–13). Media coverage on the subject of the development and perspectives for the future of rural areas of eastern Germany is particularly pessimistic. Reports tend to reach the conclusion that infrastructure in the emptying regions is no longer affordable (Beetz, Huning and Plieninger 2008, 295–296). The debate seems to be influenced by sensationalized descriptions of processes of rural decline broadcast by German media. Broadcasts and articles tend to over-emphasise statements made in haste by politicians and experts that view the wholesale abandonment of declining areas as a viable solution, conveying an impression of general hopelessness ( Bölcsche 2006). As well as this, one publication of this bent drew additional media attention; it divided German regions into winner and loser regions using a rating scale based on demographic data ( Kröhnert, Medicus and Klingholz 2006). The general response to this has been to censure the undue ‘demographisation’ of complex social, economic and cultural changes (Beetz 2007).

Debate in Germany on the topic of peripherisation stands in marked contrast to that of Japan. In discussions there, opinion-makers are rare, whereas in Germany solutions to peripherisation are widespread, such as political abandonment of rural areas including the proposals of radical concepts like active relocation of the residual population to urban areas or restoring areas to their natural state including reforestation and the return of wildlife. The perception of the Japanese countryside in the media continues to be strongly influenced by stereotypes envisioning a “rural idyll”. However, the problems of rural areas are represented in the media, which is likely to have left an impact on how rural areas are perceived by residents and non-residents.

How has the way mountain villages are perceived in Japan changed since the two regional policy reforms? A dilution of the residents’ sense of local identity is immediately apparent; it seems this may be a consequence of the loss of administrative independence in the wake of the Heisei Mergers. The loss of town names and the renaming of former municipal facilities and departments are only two of the many issues relevant to this question. The loss of the town name and the altered scope of its usage may be the most obvious changes but identity problems also arise from potentially heterogeneous traditions, heritage and economic specializations of the parties involved. There are some cases where mountain villages became integrated into a city located far away, understandably giving cause for residents’ to feel their community has been downgraded to the status of a mere urban appendage. Part and party of a loss of administrative independence is a loss of public awareness of the mountain villages in question, as they are simply removed from the map in the literal administrative sense. In the long-run, the name might be omitted and overlooked in maps, lists and statistics and it will become more difficult to gather data about the locality or conduct internet research.

Besides the identity question discussed above, mountain village residents’ self-perception will undoubtedly alter with change enforced by the need to consolidate local finances and subsequent
infrastructure cuts. Individual experiences such as closure of the local elementary school, a reduction in hospital and healthcare service provision, less frequent public transport services together with the demographic change affecting rural life can lead to a sense of hopelessness or abandonment in residents. Such changes in self-perception are to be taken very seriously as they tend to negatively affect future options of revitalising communities in mountain villages because it has a knock-on effect on their collective social representation.

IV Conclusion

The application of the peripherisation framework to Japanese mountain villages in this paper led to the conclusion that changes effected by the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers contributed to a further peripherisation with respect to each of the four dimensions without exception. While the extent and the implications of these changes vary considerably, one significant finding has come to light: mountain village communities that were motivated to participate in the merger by the typical worries about the local finance situation are likely to face a rise in the degree of peripherisation in future.

To summarize our findings, the relevant cause-effect relations, methods of estimation for the scope of the effect, theoretical implications revealed by the study (including restraints and unresolved issues) are now detailed for each of the four aspects of peripherisation.

Increased outmigration can result from a lower level of public service provision, a lesser quality of life or tax increases. Outmigration is also relevant as a secondary effect of disconnection, dependency and negative self-perception. As the extent of the effect on outmigration is less clear-cut than in the case of the other four dimensions, the use of quantitative analysis to support the findings would be ideal once the required statistical data has been published. From the point of view of theory, it is worth considering whether references to other demographic characteristics in a cohesive manner would be preferable to examination of ‘outmigration’ as an isolated variable. This finding arose after reviewing rural decline in Japan from a historical perspective, prompting the conclusion that outmigration is best viewed as a distinct development from the past and that it preceded and caused current processes of peripherisation.

The likelihood of deterioration in access to goods and services is increased as an effect of the two regional policy reforms with longer journey times and lower infrastructure budgets. It would seem that the effect of the two regional policy reforms on economic disconnection is negligible; however, the impact of infrastructural disconnection is expected to increase perceivably, also as a direct result of population decline and ageing with its inherent negative impact on demand for public transport. This in turn predictably increases the pressure on local governments to cut costs in this sector. Improvements brought about through substantial investments in transport infrastructure mean that the accessibility of mountain villages can be deemed satisfactory despite their remoteness, consequently further deterioration in circumstances start from a high level of transport infrastructure provision.

The local autonomy of mountain villages is weakened by the loss of administrative independence leading to a shift in the centre of decision-making from the mountain village to the new location of the municipal administration. Although the original idea was to improve the freedom of local governments through implementation of the regional policy reforms, there is a strong possibility that a limitation of policy options will be caused by increased pressure for the
newly created municipalities to consolidate local finances. Therefore it is debatable as to whether the intended devolution of power to local administrative bodies will be successful. It is more likely that lobbying for funds from central government ends up more important than ever, clearly something that does not equate to increased autonomy for rural municipalities.

From the point of view of theory, a pressing question arises as to whether it is an acceptable state of affairs to assume a general lack of power in the case of Japan’s periphery. While actors from non-metropolitan regions in Japan are renowned for their ability to exert influence on political decision-makers at a national level, it remains unresolved as to whether this idea can be applied to actors from mountain villages in addition to parties representing the interests of mountain villages.

Negative perceptions held by residents and non-residents of mountain villages can result from the Heisei Mergers. A diminished sense of local identity can result from the administrative steps such as the removal of the former town name in different contexts and gradually the place becomes less visible. It is also conceivable that the knock-on effects of the Trinity Reforms including cutbacks in infrastructure funding can be observed in the social representation of the population in mountain villages. However, it is debatable as to whether negative media coverage of rural developments are as widespread in Japan as they are in Germany, this void limits the factor of the impact of negative prescriptions from outside.

The application of the peripherisation approach developed in a German research context to the case of Japanese mountain villages proved to be a productive and valuable experiment. The process of tracking the effects of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers through cross-referencing the four facets of peripherisation facilitated a structured review of induced changes. Although the empirical application of the theoretical framework has been limited to municipalities and regions of post-unification Germany until now, it proved to be transferable to Japan. Further to that, differences between circumstances in the two countries were brought to light and could be used to develop ideas on modifying existing theory.

This paper explicitly referred to mountain villages that took part in the Heisei Mergers, so the task remains to examine whether and what type of processes of peripherisation can be observed in mountain villages that remained independent — either willingly or unwillingly — of the Heisei Mergers. Furthermore, it may prove interesting to calibrate the findings of this paper through closer examination of the intricate relations between the effects of the Trinity Reforms and the Heisei Mergers and other socio-economic, demographic and historical causes of peripherisation in mountain villages.

References


Beetz, S., Huning, S. and Plieninger, T. (2008) Landscapes of peripherisation in North-Eastern Germany’s country-


