

Place and Placelessness of Old Age: The Politics of Aging in Place in Rural Japan*

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(Abstract) In this study, I investigate the ways that different concepts and senses of place in rural Japan collide during the process of applying the “Aging in Place” (AIP) philosophy by diverse actors, including the central government, regional governments, civic groups, NPOs, the elderly and their neighbors, which paradoxically results in the elderly, who are the targets of the policies, becoming alienated. First, the study analyzes in depth the experiences of place and placelessness of the elderly in local communities, examining how the elderly’s sense of place is changing. Second, the study critically observes the gap between the places the central and regional governments offer and the elderly’s sense of place. Third, the study discusses the attempts at and limitations to the offering of alternative places by old people’s cooperative unions and volunteer groups. The study critically observes the political and economic context for placelessness and stresses the importance of suitable and practical alternatives, given the elderly’s changing sense of place, in order to implement AIP successfully.

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1. Introduction

The aging of populations has been progressing on a global scale, and “Aging in Place” (hereafter AIP) has emerged as a central philosophy for residence and welfare policies for the elderly (Iecovich 2014). The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines AIP as “the ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention n.d.). This also encompasses the attempt to expand community care programs for the elderly, which had previously supported the elderly until end-of-life in their homes or communities rather than in hospitals and institutions, to the regional level. Additionally, an ever-increasing number of studies indicates that guaranteeing AIP improves the elderly’s quality of life and explores concrete methods of doing so (Kim Yeongju 2006; Kaup 2009; Iijima 2012; Obuchi 2014; McCunn and Gifford 2014; Singelenberg, Stolarz, and McCall 2014).

However, there are also critical viewpoints raised regarding the policies based on discussion of the AIP philosophy. Firstly, some argue that there is a need to critically examine the implementation methods of elderly welfare policies because the AIP philosophy has gained much politico-economic justification, on the grounds that caring for the elderly in their homes more effectively reduces social costs than building new facilities (Minkler 1996; Chappell, Havens, Hollander, Miller, and McWilliam 2004; Jo Ara 2013). In particular, Jo Ara (2013) criticizes the AIP promoted in housing policies for the elderly in Japan as being intended to relieve the government’s deficit rather than focusing on the choices of the elderly themselves, which has resulted in limiting options for the elderly.

What all of the debates over AIP have in common are the implications for the necessity of research on what AIP is and how it is understood from the perspective of the elderly themselves (Keeling 1999; Frank 2002; Means 2007; Wiles, Leibing, Guberman, Reeve, and Allen 2011; Löfqvist, Granbom, Himmelsbach, Iwarsson, Oswald, and Haak 2013; Bascu, Jeffery, Abonyi, Johnson, Novik, Martz, and Oosman 2014; Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Ogg 2014). This suggests that there is a discrepancy between the space where the elderly wish to spend their final days and the space dealt with in the AIP framework of policy and welfare discourses.

The first goal of this research is to examine, in depth, the elderly’s

experience of place and placelessness.¹ The second goal is to critically examine how different the places suggested by central and local governments are from the elderly's places. The third goal is to discuss the efforts and limitations of alternative places offered by cooperative societies and citizen volunteer organizations for the elderly. Through the above discussions, this research seeks to critically examine the paradox whereby the elderly's sense of place is not properly reflected, as aspects and facts collide in the process of implementing AIP among actors with different concepts of place and senses of place.

For this purpose, this research was carried out through preliminary surveys in rural areas around Saku City in Nagano Prefecture from June to September 2009 and full surveys from June 2010 to May 2011. Additionally, supplementary surveys were carried out between January and February 2015. Saku City in Nagano Prefecture is a city of 100,000 people in a fundamentally agricultural region, in which forests take up 40.2 percent of the area; farm plots and fields, 27.1 percent; houses, 5.7 percent; and the remaining 27 percent is taken up by other categories. Of the total population, 28.1 percent is over 65 years of age (Saku City 2014).

Saku City in Nagano Prefecture was selected for this study because, as the recent Japanese residential policies have been focused on the scarcity of residences for the elderly in urban areas,² they do not properly reflect rural conditions (Jo Ara 2013). Also, the rural areas are less fragmented than the urban areas, and there has been a tendency to reproduce these regions as static spaces where deep attachment remains (Escobar 2001). Thus, the

¹ In general, "placelessness" refers to the loss of distinctive characteristics and homogenizing in the process of industrial development and standardization of the landscape that ultimately leads to a loss of a unique sense of place (Gregory, Johnston, Pratt, Watts, and Whatmore 2011).

² According to a Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications report (2013), the proportion of houses owned by the residents in Japan is 61.7 percent, of which 42.2 percent are not made of wood, and 42.4 percent are apartment houses; but in Nagano Prefecture, the proportion of houses owned by the residents is 73 percent, with 21.9 percent not made of wood, and 20.9 percent are apartment houses. In particular, in the case of elderly over 65, the proportion of houses owned by the residents was 92.1 percent, with the rate of rental no more than 7.8 percent. So, while the issue of securing housing was a problem in cities, in rural regions, such as in Nagano prefecture, the problems were those of how to solve the issue of houses standing empty, how to preserve the elderly's lifestyles in the midst of the collapse of local community, and how to repair and maintain the houses they owned. Thus, we can see that the residence issues in urban and rural regions are qualitatively different.

example of Saku City in Nagano is a good lens through which we can critically observe how AIP ideology is being implemented in contemporary Japanese society. In order to protect the confidentiality of the research participants, the names of places and people have been changed to pseudonyms. The age of research informants, noted in parentheses, reflects their age at the time of interview.

2. Theoretical Considerations of Place and Sense of Place

It is unclear what standard the literature supporting and advocating AIP adopts when determining the scope of “place” (Cutchin 2003). Some define place as being equal to the houses or facilities in which the elderly reside, for which AIP is defined as an extension of community care for the elderly (Kim Yeongju 2006; Koshida 2011; Abe and Ohnuma 2014), while others extend the concept to include the community in which the elderly live (Joseph and Chalmers 1995; Scharlach, Graham, and Lehning 2011). Although “community” can refer to a house or neighborhood living spaces (Ohashi and Kato 2014; Suzuki 2014), in policy discourse it generally refers to the administrative area in which elderly’s houses are located. In this sense, in AIP discourse, there is no clear standard for “place,” and it is defined according to convenience, depending on the situation; but a common definition in humanities and social sciences is that of “a static and secure lifeworld based on a particular locality” (Jeong Yongmun 2013: 116).

In line with the definition of place as “a static and secure lifeworld,” the elderly’s sense of place is assumed to be a rooted and fixed emotion about a place (Tahara and Kamiya 2002; Ide, Yamamoto, Uno, Suzuki, Ito, Hayakawa, and Miyaji 2014). In particular, it is emphasized that the elderly’s attachment to the places where they have lived is much stronger in comparison with other age groups (Rubinstein and Parmelee 1992). Thus, it is necessary to apply AIP ideology in order to understand the “unique” attachment to place of the elderly from a solid logical foundation.

However, experiences of and sense of place are not fixed. Sociologists and anthropologists who theorize the process by which a sense of locality is created emphasize that place is not static and stable; instead, it is discontinuous and multivocal (Appadurai 1988; Rodman 1992). In addition, many scholars advocate for the need to pay greater attention to how sense of place and identity are changing with erosion of borders and

increasingly common experiences of diaspora (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Accordingly, some contend there is a need to consider the changes that arise with the disappearance of previously significant places and the expansion of the non-place (Jeong Yongmun 2013).

While many scholars focus on the progress of deterritorialization and loss of place, others continue to stress the importance of considering the practices based on place (Geertz 1996). There is a need to be mindful of the fact that, no matter how saturated a place becomes with intersecting, diverse political and economic forces, people still try to maintain a sense of meaning and attach meaning to particular places (Feld and Basso 1996; Kim Hyeongyeong 2015). Therefore, our task now is to proactively attend to what it means to put into practice the protection of place under global conditions, as deterritorialization progresses (Rodman 1992; Escobar 2001).

In light of the above, this research does not regard the elderly's place and sense of place as a given, but rather it examines how they are formed amidst the interactions between the different interpretations and diverse stakeholders' attempts at intervention. Thus, I investigate the political significance of the elderly's attempts to protect or forfeit a place and the political and economic context in which placelessness is occurring.

3. Elderly's Experiences of Place and Placelessness

1) Elderly's Experiences of Place and the Status of AIP Practice

In this section, I consider, in depth, the elderly's experience with place. According to scholarly discussions focusing on the nature of place, places are not clearly defined entities such as physical locations or landscapes. Because a place is a multivocal experience or landscape that is created as people living in it share symbols and values and forge relationships (Ingold 1993), "the people who live in a place are the place, and the place is the people who live in the place" (Ralph 2005: 77–88). In this research, I thoroughly examine the relationship with houses and neighbors that constitutes the core of elderly's experience of place in the Saku region.

Many elders in Saku City were still living in houses built when they first met their spouses. After their children had grown up and married, and even after their spouses had passed away, the elderly continued to live in their houses. Upon visiting them, it was possible to see that many elders



Figure 1. The kitchen of Manabe-san, who lives alone.

were living with the old objects that had belonged to their children, who had moved out, and those that had belonged to their deceased spouses. For example, Figure 1 shows the kitchen of a chief informant, Manabe-san (female, 70 years). Manabe-san's husband had passed away two years prior, and she had lived alone since her son and daughter each married. Although she lived alone for years after her husband's death, she did not get rid of her husband's and children's belongings.

Typically, the elderly in Saku City start their mornings at the family Buddhist altar, offering rice and water for deceased relatives and ancestors. Sometimes they offer the bread they themselves eat for breakfast, in place of rice. When guests visit and bring fruit or sweets, the treats are brought to the altar before being eaten. In the evenings, the water is dumped out and the altar's doors are closed. The reason the elderly look after the altar so faithfully is that they think it is where the spirits of family members who have gone to the other world reside and where they will soon go themselves (Smith 1999; Yanagita 2016). Seen from the outside, it appears that the elderly are alone in an empty place after everyone else has left; but to the elderly, they are not in an empty house. Instead, it is a place full of memories of living with their children who had needed their care, and also a place where, despite the change in form of existence, the spirits of their family members remain for them to care for.

The belongings of family members and the memories and related duties were helping the elderly maintain their identity of "still active worker." The elderly in Saku City tended small plots of cultivated land near their homes, where they grew enough to share with their neighbors.

In summer, when it was hard to work during the day, they would wake up at 6 a.m. to care for the land. They considered it rewarding to send the crops they harvested to their children and grandchildren living far away.

Additionally, most of the elderly were still using old electronic appliances. This was not only because they were conservation-minded, but also because if they bought a new appliance, they would have to take a lot of time to learn how to use it, and there was no one nearby to teach them. With the help of these old objects, the elderly were able to continue their daily chores as they had done in the past, and thus maintain their identity through their tasks (Jeong Jinung 2000).

Neighbors were other entities that helped the elderly maintain their identity as autonomous beings, without their family or the state's help. In order to overcome the problem of not being able to receive help from family living far away or from official systems, the elderly established a system of mutual aid with their neighbors. The elderly in Saku City kept the custom of having tea with neighbors at least once a week. The researcher was able to carry out participant observation with the elderly while drinking tea, and on several occasions, neighbors passing by spontaneously joined the conversation while sitting with a cup of tea.

Through these tea times, the elderly eased their loneliness and solved difficulties in their daily lives. In particular, for elderly women whose spouses had died, the friends they drank tea with were "more important than the state." Ninety-year-old Toko-san (female), who was a former healthcare worker, visited friends to drink tea at least once a week. Toko-san said with a grin, "Those services that charge by the hour, like housecleaning, not covered by insurance,³ that come every week and talk to you and do your laundry for you if you're hurting—what use do I have for those? I go and talk, check in with friends, and take care of everything myself."

In fact, through visiting for tea, the elderly resolved many problems in their everyday lives. When the elderly needed to buy things at the market

³ In Saku City, every month on fixed days and at fixed times, one would throw away garbage with one's own name written on the bag. According to the guidelines, one could throw away combustible garbage eight times in each month; but for garbage that would end up in landfills, including plastics, cans, clothing and bags, bottles, and newspapers, one could only throw these out once a month. Moreover, one had to throw out the garbage between 6:30 a.m. and 7:30 a.m. on that day, and the place to throw out garbage was quite far. Because of these difficulties, some families saved up garbage for a long time before setting it out.

or visit the hospital, they made arrangements in their schedules over tea. Through maintaining connections over tea, they found others to take out the garbage, do laundry, or do other household chores when they were sick in bed. In particular, when elderly women needed an appliance fixed, heavy things moved, or a ride somewhere, they would receive help from their friends' husbands. And elderly men living alone relied on friends' wives to cook homemade meals for them. Whenever the elderly required something or someone, they utilized their network of connections.

Additionally, the elderly in Saku City maintained cooperative relationships with small stores in the region and maintained their identities as active consumers. For example, in the case of Kotsu-san (female, 72 years), who had lived alone since the death of her husband, she bought electronics from the small store in the neighborhood rather than the big store in the city. When asked why she would not shop at the big store, which had a wider variety of products and relatively cheaper prices, Kotsu-san replied, "I can't treat the local stores in town like they're not precious to me," explaining that this was a kind of "human relations." In 2011, when the country switched to digital satellite broadcasting, Kotsu-san needed to buy a new digital television and called the store she always frequented. The store owner not only chose a television set with the features she needed for a good price but visited Kotsu-san's house to install it, including the antenna. If she had bought the television from the store in the city, she may have bought it at a somewhat lower price, but she would have had to figure out all the burdensome details by herself, such as which model was good for her, how to install it, how it worked, etc. "This is why human relationships are so precious," said Kotsu-san.

Moreover, for the elderly who found it difficult to get to the bookstore or library in town, bookstore employees delivered books that had been ordered or recommended books that they thought their older customers might enjoy. Through these kinds of cooperative relationships with merchants, the elderly were not only able to buy the items they wanted as active consumers but also undertook practices to protect the small businesses and merchants with whom they had maintained a relationship for so long.

Human relations at home and in the local community occupied a very central role in the experiences of place of the elderly in Saku City. Home and local society were symbolic spaces in which the history of themselves and their families remained, and thus they were able to preserve their own

identity. Moreover, the elderly constructed mutual aid relationships with local merchants and other elderly residents who were in similar circumstances. This network allowed the elderly to live as independent subjects in their local communities. The elderly living in local communities have practiced AIP through the most ideal methods, as promoted by government and academic discourse. However, those experiences of place and senses of place are ever changing. The next section deals chiefly with the elderly's placelessness.

2) *Experiences of Placelessness and Changes in Senses of Place*

The majority of the elderly living in Saku City wanted to die in their homes or communities. However, when they said that they “wanted to face death at home,” this, in reality, implied their hopes about their own state at the time of their death. Namely, they wanted to give and receive help from family, neighbors, and members of the local community, with the implication being that they hoped to maintain a state of health that would not necessitate receiving one-sided help from anyone, until right before their death.

However, many elderly recognized the fact that the so-called “wanting to die on the *tatami*” has become impossible in reality.⁴ Most elderly who did not live with their children did not expect to receive support from them, unlike the support they had given their own parents.⁵ Thus, when the time came for them to receive support from others, they knew that their children would be unwilling to stay in an empty house that everyone has left, the way the elderly do now. The elderly also shared the concern that the custom of maintaining the home Buddhist altar would disappear when they die. Some elderly even wrote in their wills, “even if I die, the

⁴ While in South Korea, the elderly often expressed feelings about their desired quiet death with the phrase “wanting to die while sleeping,” in the case of Japan, the phrase “I want to die on the *tatami*” was standard.

⁵ According to the Saku City Elderly Welfare Department records on the ratio of elderly people living with family members in 2011, among the population over 65, of 25,979, 3,107 people (12.0 percent) lived alone (in 1975 this was only 5.7 percent). Moreover, looking at the numbers for household types in 1965, 61.8 percent were nuclear families; by 1995, 71.2 percent were nuclear families. Additionally, in 1965, the number of families with three generations living together constituted 28.2 percent, whereas in 1995 that had decreased to 18.4 percent. (Saku City Historical Compilation Committee, 2003).

altar should be maintained.”

Additionally, sometimes the elderly became intentionally estranged from friends as they aged. Remarkably, the elderly did not introduce these friends—who had given and received help even more than actual family members and enjoyed close relationships—to their real family members. When key informant Manabe-san’s son held his wedding in Tokyo, like a typical Japanese wedding, it was only open to guests who had received invitations in advance; guests were expected to pay more than 200,000 won, and seats were pre-arranged. The researcher, alongside Manabe-san’s friends, was invited under the category “Manabe-san’s friends.” But in actuality, as I observed the wedding ceremony, it appeared that “Manabe-san’s friends” were not guests but rather supporters mobilized to ensure the financial viability of the wedding. Manabe-san’s friends helped prepare and transport the food for the guests coming by bus, helped Manabe-san with her clothes, and so on. However, Manabe-san’s son did not express his thanks to them. Manabe-san explained this as a “problem between me and my friends.”

A similar situation occurred when the husband of one of Manabe-san’s closest friends, Sachiko-san (female, 72 years), passed away. Manabe-san ordered the flowers to decorate the altar for Sachiko-san and helped considerably with preparing for the funeral, but when it came time for the funeral, she only briefly greeted the family members gathered at the funeral hall and then returned home. Manabe-san waited until all parts of the funeral were over and all family members had returned home to go to Sachiko-san’s house and help with after-arrangements. I myself received a lot of help from Sachiko-san’s husband when he was alive, and so I wanted to contribute but did not know how much was appropriate. Manabe-san told me that if I gave too much money it would be uncomfortable for Sachiko-san’s family because they would not be able to pay it back. She advised me that it was fine to give nothing, or that giving a very small amount was fine. In fact, several elders told me that even when it came time for their own funerals, they would not receive help and might not even alert others about their impending death, ensuring that the deceased person’s ties of friendship did not carry over to the next generation. Thus, if an elderly person was hospitalized for a long time or had to move in with family due to their deteriorating health, in many cases, they would cut off contact with friends.

This severing of friendships meant that news about deaths was one of

the most valuable pieces of information to exchange at tea times. In old times, a funeral was a kind of local community event, but now many households only had family participate in funerals, so it was often difficult to learn who had died and when. If someone was really curious, they could get information by calling family members, or they would find out later through the letter sent out by the family of the deceased. Or they might find out through the obituary column in the local newspaper, or confirm the death through having tea with friends and acquaintances. The following example of Hanazato-san (female, 85 years) illustrates how the mutual aid relationship reaches its end.

Example 1

In the beginning, when I was left alone, I was so lonely and scared that even the sound of the wind startled me. People started visiting, and I got more and more used to it, and living alone started to be enjoyable. When you live alone, it's convenient for friends to come and visit, so they come often, and I went out to visit people a lot too. It was often five of us friends together. Since one of us could drive, we would go out and eat good food. But one of them died of cancer, and another died of lung cancer. I continued to meet the remaining people, but one of them got a stomach ulcer and got surgery and couldn't come out for a while. I thought that was kind of strange, wondering, "if it's a stomach ulcer, wouldn't taking medicine be enough? Does it really require surgery?" When she hadn't come out for a while, I bought some castella cake that she liked and intended to pay her a visit, but when I called her, her son answered and said, "She passed away last month." It was a shame that I couldn't talk to her one last time, but I consoled myself with the thought that, "She really endured it well to the end."

Hanazato-san had had three children, two boys and a girl, who had all married and moved away, and she had lived with her chronically ill husband. While her husband was still alive, she was his caretaker and did not even have time to meet her friends. She could only forge close relationships with friends after her husband passed away. But as she got older, her friends passed away one by one, and in the case of one friend, she did not learn of her death until after the funeral.

However, when learning belatedly of a friend's death, Hanazato-san and the other elderly accepted it remarkably calmly. Of course, since they knew better than anyone else the extreme loneliness and difficulty faced before death, they were plunged into sadness. However, even after time had passed, they did not give any donations and did not feel remorseful or sorry if they did not attend the funeral. These elderly people knew better than

anyone that the era of continuing the relationship into the next generation had already passed, and they knew that the deceased had expected that the relationship would be extinguished.

Cooperative relationships with shopkeepers were also gradually weakening. Elderly frequented small stores rather than big stores to the extent possible, but the small stores closed, one after another, and the old people experienced a deep sense of loss at this, as expressed in the following example.

Example 2

Until not too long ago, there was a traveling supermarket. The same person ran it for more than 20 years. But that person quit. In our generation, we never learned how to drive, so getting in the car and driving somewhere is impossible. I just use what my daughter-in-law buys and brings to me, but it's hard because I can't pick things out myself. Now that I'm as old as I am, there are many times I surprise myself. How pathetic. Now that I'm this old, I don't want to get older. But I have no choice. So, I just use what (my daughter-in-law) gives me, what she serves me. As I get older, I can't eat much anyhow. (Tenno-san, 90 years, female)

From the elderly's perspective, when a store disappears, it means their relationship with the shopkeeper, spanning several decades, and the pleasure of choosing items also disappears. As shown in Example 2, when the store where she did business disappeared, Tenno-san (90 years, female) not only could no longer feel the fun of choosing items she wanted to buy directly, but also felt a sense of loss for a social relationship that had offered support in her life.

Following the bankruptcy of small businesses, the elderly felt their own existence threatened. The elderly residing at the outskirts of town particularly felt that they had been reduced to "weak shoppers," once local businesses went bankrupt.⁶ The next example, of Noda-san (male, 73

⁶ According to a report from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (2010), by 2009 measures, the number of elderly people nationwide who reported difficulty in buying goods in daily life reached as many as 6 million people. The Agriculture, Forest, and Fisheries Policy Research Institute (2012) reported that people who lived more than 500 meters from a shop selling fish and fresh food numbered approximately 9 million. Among these, about 3.5 million were older than 65. The Division of Commerce, Industry and Labor in Nagano Prefecture defines those who cannot buy groceries due to living more than 500 meters from a store and without the ability or inclination to drive, walk, or ride a bicycle as "weak shoppers" or "shopping refugees." It was estimated that the number of so-called weak shoppers in Nagano numbered

years), shows the difficulty of living when one can no longer drive. Noda-san, who was originally from Tokyo, came to Saku City 35 years ago, after learning about it from a friend. He had bought land and built a house. At the time of the interview, Noda-san was living alone, and his family members (including his ex-wife and their two sons and one daughter) were all living in Tokyo or Yokohama. Noda-san had undergone surgery for myocardial infarction 8 years prior. After that, his right lung developed abnormalities, and one-third of it was removed. Noda-san sold his car and bought an electric bicycle.

The closest store to Noda-san's house was 4km away, so he had to charge his electric bicycle completely in order to make the trip. If his bicycle lost its charge on the trip back, he would have to deal with the weight of the bicycle and the weight of whatever items he had bought. A while later, Noda-san lost the use of his right lung completely and had to drag a green oxygen tank that was even heavier than the bicycle. It became impossible for him to even go out on the bicycle.

Manabe-san, who lived in the same neighborhood as Noda-san, sometimes went shopping for him or drove him places. Also, she sometimes gave Noda-san a portion of the food she cooked for herself. Rather than buying fresh vegetables or meat, she bought him food that would not spoil for a while, such as bananas, Calorie Balance energy bars, powdered chocolate drink, and powdered milk. For any given meal, Noda-san ate lightly, having part of a banana and a piece of Calorie Balance. Whenever I expressed worry at this, he said, "One knows best how much one should eat" and told me not to worry. After living this way for three years, Noda-san left this world. At the very end, the person at his side was none other than his neighbor Manabe-san. She took the ailing Noda-san to the hospital in the middle of the night and reported this development to his family. Noda-san passed away a week after being admitted to the hospital.

As shown in the above examples, the relationships of mutual aid made with neighbors and shopkeepers constitute a core element of the elderly's experience of place in the Saku region. But the elderly intuit that the relationships of mutual aid with neighbors will end with their generation. Thus, they take care not to pass these relationships on to their children. In addition, their relationships with shopkeepers are also being shaken, emerging as a problem that threatens the elderly's very existence.

between 52,000 and 80,000 (Shinshu Mainichi Shinbun, January 8, 2011).

As we can see, for the elderly in Saku City, the experience of placelessness goes beyond a mere sense of loss and has an actual impact on their lives. When they can no longer live on their own, they believe that it might be better to be placed in facilities, where their children can visit once in a while. But even if they want to enter a facility, there are many others waiting to enter such facilities; thus, many elderly people put their names on waiting lists far in advance. In the next section, I look into the efforts of the Japanese government and civil society groups to implement AIP in cases of elderly continuing to live in their own spaces rather than facilities, critically examining whether this helps solve the elderly's issues.

4. Attempts to Make Place in Policy Discourse and Create Alternative Places

1) *Place in Policy Discourse and Its Limitations*

In Japan's policy and academic discourse, place can often be substituted with "region." In articles introducing the concept of AIP, sometimes the term is just left as "Aging in Place" in English, but in many cases, it is translated as "regional residence" (*chiiki kojū*) or "regional location" (*chiiki zaiju*) (Abe and Ohnuma 2014; Iijima 2015). Additionally, in order to apply the concept of AIP, some offer measures of how it is implemented at "regional comprehensive support centers" (*chiiki hōkatsu shien sentā*) and small multi-function facilities, and use this as a focal point for research (Nagata and Matsumoto 2010; Nagata and Kitamura 2014). For instance, in 2005 the Japanese government completely reformed the long-term care insurance system, proclaiming that they would establish a "Community-Based Service," which could be seen to greatly enhance interest in the concept of AIP (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2005).

Ever since the long-term care insurance system began in 2000, the Japanese government has consistently claimed to have established a system that better responds to "regional" demands. Under the long-term care insurance system, cities, towns, and villages became long-term care insurance carriers, and the Japanese government claims that this has allowed for more direct response to regional citizens' demands. Additionally, it was when the government modified the long-term care insurance system in 2005 that the term "region" began to be used widely. That is, the

government has announced that, regardless of form of residence, anyone within a 30-minute radius can live safely, securely, and healthfully, 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, and can live continuously in the region they are used to, without relying on care facilities or hospitals (Iijima 2015).

However, the Regional Comprehensive Support Centers that were established by the Japanese government to proactively respond to local realities were for units of around 20,000 people (Cho 2013: 712). Saku City, which only has a population of 10,000 people, had only five such centers accessible in the area, and the number of welfare employees was insufficient. For these reasons, in the welfare employees' work, older local residents are mostly changed into digitized elderly to be managed rather than having their daily needs taken care of.

Example 3

In today's Regional Comprehensive Support Centers operations meeting, they mainly discussed how to input descriptions of consultations with elderly. The main point of contention was the category for checking elderly's method of introduction to the center. In the case of the Sagami neighborhood, there was only one case of "introduction by family members," but in the central district, there were as many as 759 cases. With a somewhat depressed facial expression, the manager for the Sagami region emphasized that there needed to be strong guidelines for how to input this information correctly. The discussion continued over how to input the number of consultations. Opinion was also divided over how to mark the first visit—whether the Regional Comprehensive Support Centers should count the first visit as the first time an elderly resident came to the center, or, instead, count the first visit as the first meeting after the basic intake meeting. As each question and protest about the input system poured out, the flustered section chief suggested, "Maybe just use your own input method for now? Just record it, and we'll refer to it and standardize the input method," and ended the meeting. (Researcher's field notes, June 14, 2010)

In order to understand how the Regional Comprehensive Support Centers were run, I participated in the monthly operations meeting for centers in each district, in which welfare workers came to city hall with their monthly reports and any questions that had come up and discussed them publicly. In so doing, I thought I would be able to hear the workers' lively testimonies about the difficulties the elderly faced, but the meetings were conducted in a completely different way than I expected. As seen in Example 3 above, rather than having a direct role in meeting with elderly, the workers devoted a lot of time to the elderly in the form of numbers and variables.

Moreover, the central government delivered guidelines for local governments in order to manage the resources allocated to the support of the aged population in an efficient manner. The guidelines mainly offered standardized numbers for what and how many services and facilities to offer in accordance with the functional capacity of the elderly.

Example 4

It was identified that in 2008, Saku City had 959 beds between all of the facilities. However, in 2014 it was estimated that there were 2,998 elderly who needed this level (levels two through five) of nursing care. Therefore, it is calculated that in order to meet the government recommendation of renovating facilities “for 37% of elderly determined to be between levels two and five,” 1,109 beds would be needed. Therefore, the city made plans to build facilities in the Nakagomi and Nozawa regions, with around 100 hospital beds each, in order to increase the number of beds to 1,018 by 2014.

However, plans that relied on “numbers” did not accurately reflect the reality of the region. The Saku City local government made plans to build an additional nursing home in one of the relatively central areas because, according to the numbers, there was no such facility there. However, this decision was made without taking into consideration different local conditions, under the logic of each neighborhood needing one center. Within Saku City, the percentage of the population over age 65 was only 3.7 percent in Izumi, while in Masaka it reached 93.3 percent. Moreover, there were already many private nursing homes being built in the downtown area, near the department stores and *Shinkansen* (bullet train) station. In comparison, in areas where the elderly were a relatively high percentage of the population, but where there were not good public transportation conditions, the number of accessible facilities did not meet the demand of the residents.

Additionally, the Saku City local government made plans to build facilities on the basis of the total number of beds. However, they did not take into consideration the reality that the degree of preference for elderly welfare facilities might depend on the type of facility. There was a high supply of workers in private facilities, such that these workers would go around trying to attract business. Elderly admitted to private centers tended to be in better health than those at “special elderly nursing homes,” (*tokubetsu rōjin ryōyō hōmu*) and thus caring for them was simpler, and since they bore more of the expenses themselves, there was a profit left over. For this reason, private companies preferred an increase in private centers. On

the other hand, the facility built to meet the needs of the elderly and their families in Saku City was a Special Elderly Nursing Home. As opposed to the elderly welfare centers that could not accommodate patients for more than three months, the families of the elderly who were difficult to look after or who had developed dementia greatly preferred the Special Elderly Nursing Homes, where elderly could live without a time limit. In particular, among the elderly who had dementia but whose “level of infirmness” was only level two or three, many hoped for admittance to the Special Elderly Nursing Homes, where they could receive constant care.

However, as the reformed insurance system was implemented, the local governments did not receive as much support from the central government as before, so there was no alternative but to drastically cut welfare budgets. If the number of facilities in Saku City increases, then citizens’ tax burden will rise; for this reason, the increase in Special Elderly Nursing Homes was strictly limited. As a result, as of March 2010, 736 elderly were waiting for a place in a Special Elderly Nursing Home.⁷

To summarize, in order to adequately respond to the demands of regions, the Japanese government introduced AIP as their primary policy ideology. However, in defining region as a governing unit in order to sufficiently manage the expenses required for an aging population, they were limited in their capacity to identify and respond to the actual needs of the elderly. Moreover, the reality is that even if an elderly person thinks that facing the end of life at home will be too difficult and wants to enter a facility, many must stay home due to the cost.

2) Attempts to Make, and Limits to Offering, Alternative Places

The Japanese government has come to recognize that the “place” defined by policy is too broad. It selected an action plan for revitalizing NPOs (Non-Profit Organizations) (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2011), and many researchers started examining cases of AIP being implemented through NPOs (Ohwa 2010; Ohashi and Kato 2014). In Saku

⁷ According to data organized by the Nagano Prefecture Health and Longevity Department, as of late March 2010, the number of people receiving home welfare care but waiting for admittance to a Special Elderly Nursing Home was 5,131 people, an increase of 338 people from the year before. Among these, the people at care level four or five accounted for 40 percent of the total (Shinshu Mainichi Shinbun, July 27, 2010).

City, the Dongshin Old People's Cooperative Union was formed under the Nagano Prefecture Old People's Cooperative Union's administrative auspices, and it provides this role.

Dongshin Old People's Cooperative Union sometimes has held meetings for workers who run facilities in Saku City, to discuss the limitations of government-led elderly welfare policies. They recognized that the long-term care insurance policy was only providing some of the services the elderly living in the district required. It was unable to help the elderly live autonomously, as it had originally intended, and it was only when the elderly absolutely required assistance that they were able to access welfare services. The union opened a "brain activation class" for ordinary elderly people. The brain activation class could be attended even by non-union members, costing 500 yen per class, and operated so that anyone could participate.

While the government has offered similar programs, the difference between this program and government programs is that the brain activation class promoted independence for participants, encouraging them to be the subjects of the class. The class content involved topics the elderly were interested in, such as health issues (senility, aneurisms), and also offered a space to critically discuss government welfare and healthcare policies. The Old People's Cooperative Union had the express goal of helping class participants develop friendships and solve problems together. Thus, the union sought to offer an alternative place for the elderly, other than the spaces they had created with their friends and neighbors or that had been provided by the government.

In the Saku region, it was not only the Old People's Cooperative Union but also volunteers who implemented various practices to solve the problems of the elderly. For example, Yoda-san (male, 70 years), who settled in the Saku region after his retirement, has been running a small self-help group called "Life Support You" since 2006. Yoda-san helps local residents with such daily activities as repairing computers and electronics, trimming trees in gardens, cleaning, cooking, shopping, painting, driving, looking after grandchildren, and taking out the trash. He also connects these people with other elderly who want to offer their help.

Efforts of those such as Yoda-san were in response to critical awareness of the limitations of formal elderly welfare policies like the long-term care insurance system. Yoda-san explained that since the diverse demands of local residents cannot all be answered by the formal system, alternative

organizations could arrive at solutions. Through measures to overcome the limitations of the system, Yoda-san has tried to make a new form of place—a “small local-level welfare community.”

However, one commonality between these attempts to make new forms of places is that, in fact, they have not received much response from the elderly themselves. Many of the elderly who actively participated in the “brain activation class” were still able to drive and did not have much difficulty making connections with new people. In fact, these elderly were far from the “alienated elderly” the Old People’s Cooperative Union had in mind at the outset. In fact, the elderly who needed help and needed these new kinds of networks did not even appear at the meetings.

Local volunteers like Yoda-san—who endeavored to make “welfare community at the local level” bigger than the places where elderly had lived with family but smaller than the places determined by the government—in the end, faced similar kinds of constraints. I met Yoda-san again, on a return visit in 2015, and he was already worn out. Though he had worked hard to form small groups, such as “Life Support You,” and also acted as a community leader and had taken on other such public roles in order to make new networks, the response from local residents was minimal. Yoda-san said bitterly that not only were most residents not interested in any activities as they got older, but also it was not easy to even get them to understand the concept of volunteering. Yoda-san was considering quitting his volunteer activities.

One reason for the local elderly’s lack of response to the Old People’s Cooperative Union and volunteers’ efforts to build new kinds of places was their perception of the artificiality of relationships made through these spaces. Additionally, the human relationships made through these groups did not lead to continuous and stable relationships that could fill in or substitute for the relationships they had lost. So, most elderly maintained their alienated state, with no choice but to wait until their condition worsened so they could receive “recognition” from the state and enter a facility or hospital.

5. Conclusion: Between Alternative Life Places and Sedimented Spaces

The reason for increased interest in AIP ideology is not merely one of

simple political and economic considerations. Recent research has called attention to diverse resources needed to raise the quality of life of the elderly in rural areas, as opposed to those living in cities (Han Gyeonghye and Kim Juhyeon 2005; Yun Seongeun 2011). The homes and local communities of the elderly in Saku City were the source of their experience of place as well as the space where their old belongings, memories, and duties existed, through which they were able to maintain close relationships with their friends, neighbors, and nearby merchants. In other words, the recognition of such value held by the local communities is one of the reasons there is an increasing interest in the AIP ideology.

However, the values and human relations that structure the elderly's places are in danger of becoming extinct. The elderly do not expect that their children will take care of them or look after the spirits of the ancestors in the same way that they themselves have. Additionally, they worry about passing on the burden of mutual aid relationships to their children, and so voluntarily allow these relationships to wither. The shops of merchants with whom they maintained cooperative ties have gone out of business, one after the other, and the elderly feel this is a threat to their survival. Thus, when the elderly wind up in circumstances necessitating that they receive care, they tend to hope to enter a facility, even if it is just near their home.

The places suggested in policy discourse as places for the elderly to spend their end-of-life are, from the elderly's point of view, too spacious and sterile. The alternative places envisioned by the Old People's Cooperative Union or volunteers are not "thick" (close-knit) or strong enough to replace the elderly's former place or dispel their sense of loss. Moreover, the reality is that facilities, hospitals and other kinds of alternative places never offer enough to elderly who have lost their place. Thus, the elderly have no alternative but to stay in an alienated status, just waiting for a spot in a facility or hospital. Thus, in order to understand why the elderly are remaining in their isolated status, even to the extent that they cut off their existing relationships, requires an explanation that goes beyond mere sentimental "attachment."

Ralph (2005), who researched the concept of "placelessness," elucidated the influence on sense of place by the macro level context, such as industrialization and the process of industrial development. If we apply Ralph's insight, placelessness in Japan's local communities emerges out of a collapse of fundamental webs necessary to live humanely and the related

so-called “regional extinction” (Masuda 2015). That is, for elderly who want to enter facilities but have nowhere to go, and who have a hard time buying the things they need, if AIP is implemented by directing them to stay in the places they are, while offering no alternatives, it is not an exaggeration to say that this qualifies as neglecting the elderly in local areas.

The elderly’s sense of place is not fixed like an anchored boat but is formed through the interaction of various actors that try to analyze and interject in the discourse about place. Therefore, for AIP not to be a dogmatic and static ideology (Keeling 1999: 110), there is a need to critically examine the inherent dynamic and political nature of the concept of place by revealing how the elderly continue to attach significance to their homes and local communities in light of the structural forces’ attempts to restructure the local communities in accordance with particular objectives (Jeong Jinung 2014: 467), and thus search for a suitable measure for the elderly’s changing sense of place.

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