This book inquires what is meant when we say “local” and what “local” means in the Japanese context.

Through the window of locality, it enhances an understanding of broader political and socio-economic shifts in Japan. This includes demographic change, electoral and administrative reform, rural decline and revitalization, welfare reform, as well as the growing metabolic rift in energy and food production. Chapters throughout this edited volume discuss the different and often contested ways in which locality in Japan has been reconstituted, from historical and contemporary instances of administrative restructuring, to more subtle social processes of making – and unmaking – local places. Contributions from multiple disciplinary perspectives are included to investigate the tensions between overlapping and often incongruent dimensions of locality. Framed by a theoretical discussion of socio-spatial thinking, such issues surrounding the construction and renegotiation of local places are not only relevant for Japan specialists, but also connected with topical scholarly debates further afield.

Accordingly, Rethinking Locality in Japan will appeal to students and scholars from Japanese studies and human geography to anthropology, history, sociology, and political science.

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In October 2018, an international group of scholars from various disciplines met at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) in Tokyo to discuss the question “What is the ‘local’ in Japan?” Not surprisingly, the three-day symposium did not provide us with one satisfying answer to this question. In fact, the very idea that such an answer could ever exist is “infuriating,” as Simon Duncan pointed out already in 1989. Nevertheless, the symposium led us to reconsider the conceptions and dynamics of locality in Japan and stimulated productive discussions on the meaning of the term “local” itself, and how rethinking locality can enhance our understanding of socio-economic and political change in Japan – all of which provided the foundation for this book.

We thank the Toshiba International Foundation, Sven Saaler and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Japan Office, and the DIJ for funding the symposium. We owe special thanks to the Director of the DIJ, Professor Franz Waldenberger, for his contribution to the symposium and his generous support throughout the whole project; and to Carolyn Cartier for her intriguing opening lecture on socio-spatial organization in the People’s Republic of China, and her knowledgeable comments during the symposium. We also want to thank all the participants for honoring us with their insightful presentations and lively discussions. We are grateful to Joachim Röhr, Elisabeth Jakubassa, Marga Dinkel, Claus Harmer, and Nami Nishioka for their support with the organization of the event, and to our fellow researchers at the DIJ for their constructive input.

As we moved on to compile the results of the symposium in an edited volume, we were glad to receive the invaluable and reassuring support from Stephanie Rogers at Routledge, who expertly guided us through the planning and review stages of our book, and the constructive comments from two anonymous reviewers. We would like to thank the editors Roger Goodman and Arthur Stockwin for kindly welcoming our book to the esteemed Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese...
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Tokyo and Vienna, November 2020
Sonja Ganseforth & Hanno Jentzsch
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In most of the literature on Japan, it is characterised by its homogeneity. While books entitled *The Japanese* or *The Japanese Mind* are less common than they once were, there is still a tendency to focus on what people have in common rather than on what makes them different. This is particularly conspicuous in the case of public policy where the Japanese state has expended great efforts to construct a view of Japan as a society where personal background is less important than merit and where everyone is perceived to have an equal chance. In the case of the education system, for example, it is sometimes said, only half-jokingly, that the Minister of Education will have a good idea of what every child is studying on a particular day; what they will get for lunch; exactly what their classrooms will look like. And yet, anyone who spends any time in different parts of Japan is struck by the differences they encounter in the local populations and in the ways in which they approach life. Those who live in the Kanto plain around Tokyo are “different” from those who live in the Kansai plain around Osaka and Kyoto; those who live in Osaka are “different” from those in Kyoto; those who live in the city of Kyoto are “different” from those who live on the other side of Kyoto prefecture on the Japan Sea coast.

Sonja Ganseforth and Hanno Jentzsch’s collection of edited essays seeks to get under the skin of the national-local conundrum by examining how the idea of the local is constructed, legitimated and, at times, manipulated in Japan. In particular, they have encouraged their authors to look at the boundaries which exist between localities and the symbolic and ritual systems which are drawn upon to separate those on one side of the boundary from those on the other. It is especially interesting to see how national attempts to create ever larger political units, often through municipal mergers, in generally rural parts of Japan are undermined by the retention of older, more locally based identities. Local populations, even when they are happy to take any benefits of national policy, are far from passive when it comes to defining themselves.
The contributors to *Rethinking Locality in Japan* come from multiple disciplines – anthropology, economics, geography, political science, sociology – but they all have a common interest in how attempts to construct local identities have impacted on local policy making in almost all areas of life – economic, political, social – and how policies have interacted with broader social changes such as demographic decline and changes in food production in rural areas. The result is a major new compendium of case studies, each of which can be either read in its own right or as part of a collection of cases studies which demonstrates multiple similarities and, importantly, differences. As the joint editors of the Nissan Institute/Routledge Japanese Studies series – which has published well over a hundred volumes since its inception in 1986 – we are proud to publish *Rethinking Locality in Japan*. The case studies in the book will help to undermine the continuing and persistent mythology of Japanese homogeneity; they will add substantially to the growing literature on the nature of “place” (as the study of locality is increasingly called) which draws most of its examples from Western societies; and, like all good case studies, they will stand the test of time.

Roger Goodman
Arthur Stockwin
Oxford, January 2021
1

INTRODUCTION

Rethinking locality in Japan

Sonja Ganseforth and Hanno Jentzsch

What is the “local” – and why do we ask?

Social sciences and humanities are frequently concerned with the “local,” both as a unit of analysis for the in-depth investigation of macro-level phenomena and as a research subject in and of itself. Across the disciplines, scholars analyze place-making practices, socio-spatial inequalities, the local implementation of national policies, the structure of local governance, voter behavior in electoral districts, the meaning of local identities, the interrelations of local and global transformations, and the development of local industries. Perceptions of the local and its boundaries also shape our everyday life. Consumers might prefer “local” products over imported goods, parents might worry about which school district their neighborhood belongs to, and newcomers might struggle not to act out of place (Cresswell 1996) in order to win acceptance in their new residential community.

Whether in research or everyday life, these examples all concern certain spatializations of social relations – and yet, the localities in question are constituted very differently, with boundaries not necessarily formally defined or visible on maps and, more often than not, fuzzy and subjective. Local administrative units – albeit probably the most common subnational analytical unit, at least in political science – are limited in demarcating the “local” and associated socio-economic, political, and cultural phenomena. They contain and cut across the boundaries of neighborhoods, sites of local production and tourism, and spheres of solidarity and social cohesion, and are themselves frequently subject to change. As soon as we recognize localities as socially (re)produced, historically contingent, and never entirely fixed (Massey 2005), the answers to the seemingly trivial question of what is (the) local, too, become highly contingent and political, as heterogeneous concepts of locality and multidimensional borders overlap, coexist, or even clash.

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Local dynamics in Japan

This book offers an interdisciplinary collection of articles that take the question of “What is (the) local?” as their analytical starting point. While this question has been discussed intensively since the 1980s and holds universal relevance for any geographic region, the contributions in this book all focus on Japan, which provides a particularly interesting case for problematizing locality. The complexities of local relations in Japan are expressed in a broad variety of ways, including terms that signify formal territorial delineation (chiku, district; shikuchōson, municipalities), terms that evoke the notion of historically grown socio-spatial relations (sounaku or mura, natural village; buraku or shiraku, hamlet; chōnai or kinjo, neighborhood; kyōdōtai, local [cooperative] community), or fluid and versatile terms to describe one’s home area (jimoto or furusato) and the respective region (chiiki or chihō), all of which are interrelated in multiple ways. Adding to this complexity, the formal boundaries of what constitutes the “local” in Japan were altered abruptly and deliberately in the recent past. In the early 2000s, a series of political reforms aimed at decentralization and the restructuring of central–local fiscal relations resulted in a massive wave of municipal mergers. On the one hand, this development is in line with the global trend towards consolidating local governments (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013). On the other hand, however, municipal mergers in Japan happened in a remarkably rapid and disruptive fashion. Between 2002 and 2006, hundreds of previously autonomous towns and villages became part of amalgamated municipalities. As a result, Japanese municipalities became extensive in international comparison and strikingly heterogeneous both socio-economically and topographically. As the newly merged towns and villages retain distinct histories, identities, and even limited formal and informal self-governing capacities, large parts of Japan are in the process of renegotiating local governance, the local redistribution of resources, and socio-spatial belonging (Shimada 2014; Rausch 2016; Reiher 2014).

Beyond the disruptive effects of municipal mergers, locality in Japan has been changing in dynamic ways in the context of prolonged socio-economic and socio-cultural processes. Rural–urban migration before and after the Pacific War, more recent demographic trends such as aging and (rural) depopulation, climate change, and man-made and natural disasters have all contributed to the socio-economic, cultural, and even topographical reconfiguration of socio-spatial formations below, beyond, and across municipal boundaries. Similar processes have been occurring elsewhere in the world as well, yet Japan’s remarkable path from postwar industrial development to contemporary demographic shrinking (and its responses) might well be considered instructive for other countries following similar trajectories (Matanle 2017). Japan is also an important arena for globalization processes such as the establishment of global commodity chains, the negotiations of free trade agreements as well as related technological developments and information flows, all of which have profound effects on urban areas and the “global countryside” (Woods 2007). Since the 1970s, several waves of academic discourses and political
programs have focused on the “revitalization” of Japan’s regions. Although the target of these revitalization efforts remains elusive, and the terms and concepts have changed over time, discourses surrounding idealized notions of regions (chiiki), villages and towns (mura, machi), rurality and the “old hometown” (furusato), or terroir (jūdo) still (re)frame perceptions of the “local” in Japan beyond administrative divisions. This has concrete influence, for example on the consumption of local produce and places in tourism, the selective allocation of public goods, or migration patterns (Klien 2020; McGreevy 2012; Kitano 2009; Jentzsch 2020; Tamanoi 1979). At the same time, the notion of furusato also constitutes a rallying point of national(ist) identity in a presumed age of modernity, globalization, and unravelling boundaries (Ivy 1995; Robertson 1988).

Local questions

Against this background, the contributions in this book inquire into what constitutes localities in Japan – their relationalities, imaginaries, and materialities, as well as their spatial, social, formal, and informal boundaries, and the dynamics that produce, reinforce, or alter these boundaries. Beyond these conceptual issues, which speak to an ever-growing literature on spatial thinking in the social sciences and humanities, the contributions look at concrete political, socio-economic, and cultural problems through the analytical lens of (changing) “localities” in order to produce new questions, reveal different stakeholders, and uncover the impact of social constellations that otherwise remain invisible. Our goal is not to find one single answer to the question of what is the “local” – such an answer would have to be either overly specific and attuned to context and discipline, or banal and superfluous, if not outright impossible (Duncan 1989). Rather, we want to emphasize that precisely because the local is always contingent, critical reflection of its relations and boundaries remains important.

The contributions here show this as well as how localities are up for contestation both from within and without (the latter including, of course, researchers themselves). Moreover, they address the ongoing de-institutionalization of localities as a common, but arguably still underdeveloped, research topic (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013; Zimmerbauer et al. 2017), and the various processes of (formal and informal) “re-institutionalization” of localities both in the context of administrative restructuring and long-term socio-economic and cultural change. In general, the tensions and frictions arising from social, political, and geographical spaces not (or not anymore) aligning are a primary concern of engaging the “local” in Japan. This perspective brings to attention questions of power, agency, and responsibility. Who has the authority to define the character of the local? Who has the power to redraw boundaries, and why and how are boundaries redrawn? Who has the agency to shape the character of the local, and who is included or excluded? Who bears responsibility for the effects of the differential distribution of benefits or burdens? Who bears the risks when local boundaries are altered? Who represents localities, and whose perspectives and voices become muted by specific
conceptions of the local? Before we introduce the contributions in more detail, we will lay the conceptual groundwork with a brief discussion of (local) places and boundaries.

Conceptualizing the “local”

Our concern with the local corresponds to the contention that *space matters*, which stands at the core of what has been labeled the “spatial turn” in the social sciences and humanities. Approaches to spatial questions since the 1980s have re-conceptualized space not as an objectifiable, homogeneous, and measurable container where detached events just happen to *take place* but as a contingent product of social, political, and cultural relations, which is itself involved in the formation of such relations (Elden 2010; Lefebvre 1974; Massey 2005; Warf and Arias 2009). Traditionally, geography has been the discipline most prominently concerned with the characteristics and shapes of (physical) places. However, other disciplines have become increasingly more attuned to the spatial aspects of socio-economic relations, politics, power, and culture. This book aims to contribute to this growing literature.

Studying locality in particular carries assumptions about *scale*, usually implying a zooming in below the level of the nation-state, perhaps even much smaller. There is a broad variety of nested, formally and informally constituted socio-spatial formations that can be this locality, and these formations can also reach far beyond the nation-state, such as diasporic networks and transnational political or cultural groups. Coming from a wide range of disciplines, the contributions to this volume highlight different aspects of what the local is, produce different questions, and apply different spatial concepts. For some disciplines and research questions, administrative sectors might suggest themselves as the most convenient units of analysis. We do not *per se* reject the notion to treat administrative sectors as localities. Yet, we agree with Agnew (1998) that viewing social formations primarily through the multiscalar boundaries and delineations of reified state power constitutes a “territorial trap,” which runs the risk of missing other socio-spatial relations that are nested within, overlap, or go beyond political-administrative structures, both contemporary and historically, but may be equally – or even more – relevant (Massey 1991b). As our contributions address various Japanese manifestations of this problematique both directly and indirectly, the collection ties in with longstanding theoretical debates on the conceptualization of locality and place, which are outlined in the following sections.

Spatial concepts and imaginaries

Locality is often associated with “place.” Intuitive and commonplace understandings of local places relate to their role in people’s everyday lives, thriving on co-presences, frequent meetings and interactions, and a shared feeling of belonging. As such, they are intimately connected to personal life worlds and horizons of
experience, which is also reflected in Japanese expressions of locality, e.g., in the term “jimoto” (Sekiguchi et al. 2017). The idea of a lived space corresponds to Lefebvre’s (1974) concept of espace perçu, which can differ substantially from the espace conçu, the conceived space of administrative boundaries and planning. With the growing interest in spatial relations, place and locality have received intensified attention, especially in human geography (Massey and Thrift 2003). For example, in his theory of “structuration,” Giddens (1984, 118), concerned with the reciprocal co-production of social structures and agency, coined the concept of the “locale” referring to “the use of space to provide the settings of interaction, the settings of interaction in turn being essential to specifying its contextuality” (emphasis in original). Building on Giddens, Soja (1989, 151) defines “localities” as “particular types of enduring locales stabilized socially and spatially through the clustered settlement of primary activity sites and the establishment of propinquitous territorial community.”

Globalization and “space-time compression” (Harvey 1990) have served as important catalysts for the debate on locality, in that the flow of goods, information, and people has been ascribed the potential to dissolve socio-spatial boundaries on the global, national, and local scale in interweaving processes of de- and rere-territorialization (Brenner 1999). While the local renegotiation and co-production of global processes has been described by the neologism “glocal” (Swyngedouw 1997), (local) “place” is sometimes juxtaposed with “space” (e.g., of globalized, equalizing flows) as the locus of difference or resistance (Escobar 2001; Castree 2004). As such, local place has also served as a central reference point in nationalist, regionalist, and fascist ideologies as the roots of their (imagined) social and cultural identity which globalization threatens to disrupt, resonating with the (re)invention of the idealized homeplace (funsato) in Japan. Here, the 1973 oil shock and uneven socio-economic development between the three major metropolitan areas and the peripheries also inspired increased attention on the regions and the emergence of “regionalism” (chiiki shugi) in the social sciences and politics (Kitano 2009; Tamanoi 1979). Similarly, geographical differentiation of socio-economic transformations in Britain elicited the establishment of “locality studies” in the 1980s, heralding a major controversy around the conceptualization of place in British geography (Jones and Woods 2013). A prominent figure in this debate, Doreen Massey (1991a, 1991b, 1993) argued against an understanding of place as a reactionary resort of fixity and static identities inhibiting critical political and social analysis and (universalizing) theorization. Instead, Massey (1991a) proposed as a progressive concept a “global sense of place,” a relational understanding of place which refutes the idea of “homogeneous” communities with clearly demarcated boundaries. The relational approach conceptualizes places as nodal points in networks, as meeting points of interaction, and articulations of social relations from within and beyond (Massey 1991a). It implies that localities are contested, defended, and reproduced in constant processes of change and reconstruction, often in a less than harmonious manner: “Localities will ‘contain’ (indeed in part will be constituted by) difference and conflict” (Massey 1991b, 277). This
conceptualization of space as social construct gained momentum far beyond the field of human geography and also informed the analysis of the contingent interrelations between social and spatial dynamics presented in this book.

Amidst mounting attention for mobilities (Urry 2007; Baumann 2000), cultural flows (Appadurai 1996; Iwabuchi 2002), and networks (Castells 2000), theoretical interest in locality has persisted. For example, the importance of “local context in constituting social worlds” has been pointed out for sociology (Fine 2010, 355), policy studies have been focusing on localism (Evans et al. 2013), and migration studies have called for a “comparative theory of locality” (Schiller and Caglar 2009). In the Japanese context, the relations between space, place, and locality have been taken up, for example, with respect to the study of politics (Yamazaki 2010), “place-making” projects for rural revitalization (Kitano 2009; Love 2013; Dilley et al. 2017; Nakatsuka 2019), the production of tourism sites (Okamoto 2015; Ochi 2012), urban development (Horikawa 2010), and environmental movements (Tanaka 2018).

In recent years, the growing influence of assemblage thinking has also informed attempts to extend the relational understanding of (local) place (Jones and Woods 2013). Based on the poststructuralist work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), assemblage theory fundamentally repudiates human/non-human binaries and hierarchies (DeLanda 2016, 2006). From this perspective, localities (such as states or cities, see DeLanda 2006) are viewed as the contingent coming together of a range of (ex)changeable and heterogeneous components of different ontologies and across different scales. For example, Woods (2015) analyzes the transformation of rural places in Canada and New Zealand by taking into account the interrelation of material components of place (such as landscape, soil) with intangible components (such as practices, human relations) and de-territorializing forces (such as in- and outmigration and the advent of new technologies). Assemblage thinking has also been applied to place-making efforts in rural Japan (Chang 2015). Other applications can be found in this book.

**Boundaries**

The conceptualization of the local is closely related to the conceptualization of boundaries. A dynamic, relational understanding of places as constituted by social relations might seem to refute the notion of boundaries containing delineated spaces. Indeed, the notion of matching, static, and sharply demarcated socio-spatial boundaries has often been called into question in geography and other social science disciplines: There are “too many of them, they are too porous, and they interfere with one another to produce too many complexities” (Mol and Law 2005, 637). Boundaries have thus been reconceptualized as historically contingent outcomes of social and political processes (Newman and Paasi 1998), which can be blurry, folding, or travelling (Mol and Law 2005). Nevertheless, boundaries can still play a significant and potent role in the relation between spaces, objects, and people (Löw and Weidenhaus 2017; Agnew 2008). Borders and other types of
demarcations are crucial in the establishment of territoriality. They require measuring technologies such as cartography and geometry to render space readable and accessible to (state) power (Elden 2010) or to demarcate and produce private property (Blomley 2003). Contrary to the image of globalization as dissolving socio-spatial boundaries, we actually see a proliferation of physical manifestations of borders, such as in gated communities or fortified state borders, as states are anxiously scrambling to fix and reassert their contested borders and identities (Bille 2016). Accordingly, issues surrounding borders, boundaries, and borderlands have received growing attention across various disciplines in recent years (Kolossov 2005; Agnew 2008; Nail 2016).

A common interest of geography and other social science disciplines is the question of how different types of boundaries relate to each other. The question seems especially pertinent in narrow socio-spatial settings such as organically evolved villages or neighborhoods, where spatial boundaries – including those administratively defined – might align with social boundaries and specific norms, identities, and practices. Such constellations can have concrete consequences. For example, Tsai (2007) has argued that in rural China local authorities in villages with a stable overlap of social and political boundaries are more likely to allocate public resources according to the public good, not their private rent-seeking interests. Similarly, Jentzsch (forthcoming) argues that stable local socio-spatial boundaries tend to produce more “organized” local responses to agricultural reform in Japan. Yet we cannot assume such overlaps to be universal, or even “natural.” Even in narrow spatial contexts, local communities are rarely (if ever) truly homogenous but display “multiple identities” (Massey 1991b), which are nested in complex, at times contradictory, ways (Chidester and Gadsby 2009). Any given individual’s life-course can be simultaneously shaped by residency in a certain neighborhood, lifelong support for the hometown’s soccer club, identification with a nation-state, and/or a sense of belonging to social or political categories more or less unconnected to territorial boundaries (the feminist movement, social class, etc.).

Frictions and tensions between different dimensions of locality become especially visible when boundaries are changed and localities are reconstructed, subjected to different territorializations, and charged with new meanings. This often occurs in the context of the (re)drawing of sub-national administrative boundaries, which is a common instrument in pursuit of decentralized and allegedly more “rational” forms of local governance (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013), and a powerful tool for states to reassert their power (Cartier 2015). Although sub-national boundary changes can occur quite rapidly (as illustrated not least by the recent wave of municipal mergers in Japan), they typically trigger prolonged processes of redefining and adjusting social and symbolic boundaries and/or redistributive issues within the newly created administrative units. Such processes are both contested and contingent, in that the amalgamation of municipalities can reinforce or even amplify the social boundaries associated with the merged localities but also support the creation of new inclusive local identities with concrete political and
socio-economic consequences, for example regarding local political representation and resource allocation (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013; Terlouw 2018) or even national-level political ideological dispositions. Blesse and Rösel (2017), for example, link the rise of right-wing populist parties in Eastern Germany to the fundamental restructuring of municipalities after German reunification in 1990.

Beyond redrawing administrative boundaries, the boundaries of local places are also altered in more discrete and incremental ways. The residents of a given neighborhood may routinely engage in attempts to remake its (social) boundaries in order to include certain characteristics but exclude other less desirable elements (Logan 2012, 516–517). Localities may be actively redefined for economic reasons, such as the marketing of “locally produced” goods or touristic development (Calboli and Ng-Loy 2017; Perkins et al. 2015; Okamoto 2015). Whether through rapid redrawing of administrative demarcations or more subtle processes (or both), the formation and ongoing transformation of localities and their social, spatial, political, or cultural boundaries constitute important acts of asserting or renegotiating power relations, driven by the interests of actors both present and absent (Paasi 2013). Accordingly, the question of whether, when, and to what extent lived spaces and political-administrative spaces align in the “local” in Japan is one of the major themes running through the contributions in this book.

Rethinking locality in Japan

In the context of these intersecting academic discourses, this book discusses the “local” in Japan from the perspectives of anthropology, human and economic geography, political science, sociology, and history. The contributions address socio-spatial localities and their dynamic and multifaceted boundaries as a research subject in and of itself, the consequences of changing local socio-spatial relations for certain political and socio-economic processes in Japan, or a combination of both. Mirroring this analytical framework, the book is structured in four interrelated thematical sections. The first section circles around different perspectives on localities as lived spaces, the second section analyzes shifting social risks through the lens of distinct local social worlds, the third section concentrates on the frictions between various forms of (changing) social and spatial boundaries, and the final section addresses changing locality in Japan from a macro perspective. Here we provide an overview of the contributions.

Relating localities as lived spaces in Japan

The contributions in the first section all conceptualize locality as lived space, thereby revealing discrepancies between lived and administrative spaces and between different forms of (local) belonging and alienation. William Kelly reflects on more than 40 years of anthropological field work in the Shōnai Plain (Yamagata Prefecture) to discuss how locality in rural Japan is constituted by formal and informal means of demarcation, social relations, and the individual life worlds of its
residents. The chapter juxtaposes different socio-spatial imageries offering a nuanced perspective on what locality means in rural Japan and turns this discussion into an argument against catastrophic scenarios that predict the disappearance of regional Japan (and its localities) due to demographic and socio-economic change.

This reasoning is echoed in Paul Hansen’s chapter on “rur-bane relations” in a peripheral city in central Hokkaido. Drawing on assemblage theory, Hansen analyzes the material, social, and extra-local components of everyday life in this city and contrasts this perspective on the local with the dominant perspective which captures this and other peripheral municipalities in Japan as shaped predominantly by the negative effects of demographic and economic shrinking. Without denying the tangible effects of such processes, Hansen’s chapter shows that refuting municipal-level statistical data as the only reference point to characterize locality yields different – and potentially less deterministic – insights into the quality of local life.

Pointing in a similar direction, Barbara Holthus and Wolfram Manzenreiter ask what and where the “local” is in the often-assumed link between rural life and well-being. Using interviews and observations in two different rural settings in the Aso region (Kumamoto Prefecture), the authors show that subjective well-being is closely related to locality (for better or for worse) as constituted by dense social relations in the narrow confines of one’s settlement. The political-administrative locality Aso City, on the other hand, is perceived as highly elusive and removed from everyday concerns – thus calling into question the ability of amalgamated local governments in Japan to communicate their political functions and responsibilities.

In her study on urban newcomers in rural places in northern Japan, Susanne Klien adds another perspective on locality in rural Japan as a coming together of social relations. Driven by neoliberal pressures to find self-fulfillment and make a living through entrepreneurial endeavors, these settlers draw on and reshape their new local communities. Maintaining their trans-local and trans-national life experiences and networks as their main points of reference, they lead “localized yet de-territorialized lives,” both fragmenting and reifying locality in their appeals to non-local audiences and potential customers.

Local social worlds at risk

The making and unmaking of local social worlds in Japan unfolds in response to concrete social, economic, and/or environmental risks. Tarek Katramiz analyzes how residents in Omaezaki City and neighboring cities in Shizuoka Prefecture have normalized the Hamaoka Nuclear Power Plant as a part of local everyday life. The nuclear accident in Fukushima Daiichi in 2011 has temporarily shaken up this arrangement by shining a spotlight on the risk faced by host and neighboring communities. Related studies have highlighted the polarizing function of administrative boundaries determining who benefits economically from hosting nuclear power plants. In contrast, Katramiz shows that residents across municipalities cope by applying similar risk normalization strategies to integrate the plant into their local sense of place defined more by shared risk than administratively divided benefits.
Drawing on ethnographic field work in a rural village in Nagano, Isaac Gagné addresses the interrelation between the “local economy of care” and the shifting national political economy of welfare. He shows how the villagers over a span of 30 years navigated aging and depopulation, changing healthcare policies, and the merger with a neighboring city by developing a community-based social welfare system. This local system preceded and later emulated national policies to promote market-based welfare services and community-based welfare support. Yet, Gagné argues that local motivations and desires do not necessarily align with the state’s neoliberal agenda but rather reflect the creative (re)combination of new legal and social frameworks with previous community structures and ethics.

Analyzing the trajectory of San’ya, a former day laborer quarter in northern Tokyo, Hanno Jentzscher’s chapter also illustrates the local heterogeneity of the Japanese welfare regime. San’ya has long served as a sanctuary for people with nowhere else to go. In the postwar era, San’ya’s day laborers provided flexibility for an otherwise rigid Japanese labor market, thus facilitating welfare through work for regular employees. As the day labor market declined, many workers shifted into the public social welfare system. Most (former) day laborers remained in San’ya, where a unique local social infrastructure amends and substitutes the minimum formal protection. However, city redevelopment and the arrival of new residents are increasingly challenging San’ya’s sanctuary functions.

Localities under contestation

Although maybe not (or not exclusively) decisive for residents’ sense of place, administrative and formal boundaries in Japan play a crucial role in the formation and mobilization of local identities, the formulation and implementation of policies, and access to resources. Thus, the restructuring of localities is often met with profound resistance. This is also true for historical events of administrative restructuring, as Sven Kramer’s chapter on local opposition against the wave of municipal mergers in the 1950s (Shôwa dai-gappei) shows. Kramer analyzes two cases of localities that pushed back against the pressure to merge, thereby revealing striking differences regarding their local motivations and strategies. In the first case, residents employed radical measures in their fight for municipal independence, based on a strong sense of local identity and historical animosity against one of the neighboring localities. In the second case, the opposition against a municipal merger formed around a conflict over forest ownership and pursued its goals in a much more consensus-oriented fashion.

Turning to the aftermath of the Heisei Mergers in the mid-2000s, Timo Thelen and Hitoshi Oguma use the case of emerging transportation systems in Kyōtango City, Kyoto Prefecture, to uncover the lingering influence of abolished boundaries within merged municipalities. Like other peripheral regions of Japan, large parts of Kyōtango lacked access to public transportation in 2010. Subsequently, the municipality has seen the emergence of an unpractical, geographically divided patchwork of alternative public transport projects — including a
community bus, an electric vehicle taxi, and an NPO employing the taxi app Uber. As these projects mirror the historical administrative boundaries of formerly independent municipalities, the transportation system became an arena for reproducing these boundaries and the sentiments and divisions attached to them.

Adding a different socio-spatial dimension, Sonja Ganseforth focuses on coastal fishery cooperatives. These highly exclusive and closed communities have come under increasing economic and political pressure to consolidate into larger entities. Moreover, recent reforms are challenging the cooperatives’ prerogative to manage fishing rights. Yet, boundary changes on land through municipal and cooperative mergers are not necessarily reflected in the sea, where historical boundaries of cooperative fishing grounds persist. Considering the sea as an inextricable part of the more-than-human assemblage constituting locality in fishery cooperatives, the contribution inverts the perspective on the local from the land to the sea to uncover wider trans-local networks formed by ocean currents and schools of migratory fish.

Traditional networks of production depending on the material components of a locality also characterize the wine production in the Kōfu Basin (Yamanashi Prefecture) examined by Aaron Kingsbury. The chapter analyzes how wine producers and local administrations seek to link production to quality via attachment to an array of marketable, yet politically and culturally problematic “local” geographic places. Public branding programs to promote the local wine industry tend to be based on administrative demarcations but disregard or even disrupt historically grown relations between growers and wineries. The chapter not least points to broader issues with the national political agenda to promote rural revitalization, which often relies on the creation of re-localized specialty products and place branding.

**Local–national dynamics**

The dynamic interaction between (re)defining local places, the alteration of local administrative boundaries as well as national politics and policies can also be observed from a macro perspective. Anthony Rausch and Junichiro Koji focus on the *furusato nōzei* program (“Hometown Tax”) established in 2008. This policy allows taxpayers to channel a portion of their tax payments to a municipality of their choice, which then offer a range of “local specialties” as thank-you gifts. Based on the analysis of statistical data, the authors argue that the program is successful in its mission to redistribute funds to disadvantaged municipalities, albeit for the “wrong” reasons: Rather than a sense of belonging, attachment, or obligation to a specific place, for example one’s *furusato*, the attractiveness of the thank-you gifts or the wish to support a particular policy seem to determine the flow of donations. As the *furusato nōzei* program turns the civic duty to pay taxes into an individual choice, it sets up socio-economically and fiscally struggling localities for competition on a market of citizenship.

Kyohei Yamada shows that the Heisei Municipal Mergers fundamentally changed the dynamics of central–local political and electoral relations by reducing
the number of municipal politicians, who had been crucial for mobilizing voters in national elections. This weakened the representation of rural areas, once the stronghold of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which seems puzzling, given that the LDP also pushed for the Heisei Mergers. Yet, the chapter argues that the redrawing of the local administrative landscape could also be understood as part of a strategic reorientation towards an urban electorate on behalf of the LDP, albeit at the expense of the interests of increasingly peripheralized rural areas.

Addressing another aspect of local representation, Ken Victor Leonard Hijino analyzes two recent reform proposals to alter the role and structure of local assemblies and elections. Local democracy suffers from low voter turnout and a lack of candidates. In seeking to solve these issues, the reform proposals also reveal underlying assumptions about the qualitative differences between local democracy in rural and urban settings, including, for example, the notion of rural personalized versus urban party-based political competition.

Taking a step back, Peter Matanle in his coda broadens the perspective on locality to the global level, bringing to attention the existential crises that the Earth as a whole locality is facing in this transformational moment in the Anthropocene. While stressing the global nature of climate and ecological crises and the Covid-19 pandemic, he also highlights the locally differentiated effects of these crises and touches upon the question of how these processes play out in Japan in particular.

The contributions in this book show that refining our understanding of local socio-spatial relations uncovers nuanced and subtle processes that are concealed by taken-for-granted spatial analytical categories and opens new perspectives on multi-layered socio-economic and political processes reshaping Japan. Together they provide rich insights into the social construction of local life worlds and the opportunity to challenge unidimensional predictions of localities “vanishing” due to demographic shrinking and socio-economic decline. The chapters highlight the persistent inertia of historical spatial relations and divisions and invite a critical assessment of the omnipresent and politically charged buzzword “regional revitalization.” We show that the boundaries of the “regions” at the receiving end of such revitalization efforts are highly elusive, so that a kaleidoscopic array of national policies meets (or rather: does not meet) countless and at times conflicting local socio-spatial formations, with potentially negative consequences for policy outcomes and rural livelihoods. We reveal how local agency patches the gaps in the Japanese welfare regime, and how mergers, policy reforms, and shifting socio-economic constellations affect these local social worlds. Not least, we show that changing local socio-spatial relations and perceptions of the local have important implications for political representation, national electoral strategies, hidden processes of peripheralization within amalgamated municipalities, and the relation between taxpayers and (local) citizenship. Many other social, cultural, political, historical, linguistic, and economic aspects of making and remaking localities in Japan remain absent in this book. Yet, we hope that this interdisciplinary collection may serve as an inspiration for more research on the intricate dynamics of local socio-spatial relations in Japan, and for further consideration of Japanese cases in the broader theoretical debate on space, place, and locality.