

From Shrinking Communities to Caring Communities

Local Governance in South Korea, China, and Japan

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Research Puzzle

Demographic decline is more than population loss

Demographic contraction

- Aging · low fertility · shrinking workforce · regional depopulation

Local consequences

- Closing schools and businesses · weaker transport · care-worker shortages · more older people living alone

Core argument

- The deeper risk is erosion of relational infrastructure: care, reciprocity, trust, and everyday social connection.

From Growth to Shrinkage

A change in the governing assumption

Growth-Oriented Governance

- Attract population
- Investment & firms
- Infrastructure expansion
- Tourism & employment

Shrinking-Society Governance

- Maintain everyday life
- Sustain social reproduction
- Protect local care capacity
- Preserve relational infrastructure

Three Research Questions

What must local governance do differently?

Q1 How are responsibilities of the state, market, family, and community being reorganized?

Q2 Can residents move from passive recipients to participants and co-producers of care?

Q3 What institutional arrangement can combine public responsibility, professional services, technology, and community relationships?

Theoretical Framework

Four concepts organize the analysis

Shrinking Society

Growth can no longer be assumed

Care Democracy

Care is a public and democratic question

Relational Infrastructure

Services must be embedded in relationships

Care-Oriented Self-Governance

Residents participate without replacing public responsibility

Care as Relational Infrastructure

Beyond a service-rich but relationship-poor system

Service-Based Care

- Medical care
- Nursing
- Meals
- Transport
- Housing assistance

Relational Care

- Recognition
- Companionship
- Trust
- Reciprocity
- Continuity

Relational Infrastructure

- Networks that allow communities to function

Comparative Framework

Three modes of connecting administration and community life

South Korea

- Relative separation
- Formal care systems ↔ local community
- Key issue: coordination

China

- Administrative integration
- Shequ connects grassroots administration and everyday life
- Key issue: autonomy

Japan

- Territorial-network integration
- Everyday living area connects services, municipalities, and residents
- Key issue: sustainability

South Korea

Institutional expansion — but a weak link with resident self-governance

- Long-term care insurance expanded professional eldercare.
- Integrated community care seeks to connect health, welfare, housing, and daily-life support.
- Main limitation: institutional fragmentation across sectors.
- Residents are still often treated as beneficiaries or consumers rather than co-producers.

Key transition: Services → Relationships

South Korea: Two Relational Experiments

Different routes toward a caring community

Care Clinic (Dolbom Clinic)

- Extends medical care into homes and everyday living environments.
- Connects health needs with housing, mobility, family relations, and social isolation.
- → Relational reorganization of professional care

Han River Social Cooperative

- Not a formal care provider, but sustains repeated citizen participation through ecological stewardship, environmental education, and community activities.
- → Resident-led relational infrastructure

China

State-led community care through Shequ

Shequ (社区)

- Neighborhood-level unit of grassroots governance, generally organized around Residents' Committees.
- Links local government, households, public services, community organizations, and families.

Strength

- Strong administrative coordination
- Rapid resource mobilization
- Accessible community-based services

Central Tension

- An administrative community is not necessarily a caring community.
- Can mobilized participants become genuine co-producers?

China: Shanghai and Smart Eldercare

Administrative capacity meets technological innovation

15-Minute Elderly Care Service Circle

- Community comprehensive eldercare centers + neighborhood service stations
- Meals · day care · health support · home-based assistance · social activities
- Brings professional care closer to everyday life.

Smart Eldercare

- AI · IoT · digital monitoring · emergency response · sensors · platforms
- Potential: efficiency and support for older people living alone
- Question: Does technology strengthen relationships—or replace them?

Japan

Community-based integrated care and local social innovation

- Japan organizes integrated care around the everyday living area (nichijō seikatsu-ken).
- Medical care, long-term care, prevention, housing, and daily-life support are territorially connected.
- Core principle: people should be able to continue living in familiar communities.
- Local cases show that institutional integration must be reinforced by relational capacity.

Key transition: Integrated Care → Sustainable Relational Networks

Japan: Three Local Experiments

Three dimensions of a caring community

Eigenji

- Professional care + everyday life
- “What does this person need in order to continue living in this community?”
- → Embedded professional care

Tatebayashi

- Care through everyday reciprocity
- Older residents as both recipients and contributors
- → One-way service → reciprocal participation

Kamiyama

- Creative migration · education · entrepreneurship · flexible participation
- Light community and future generations
- → Open, intergenerational networks

Comparative Pathways

Different missing links, one common direction

Dimension	South Korea	China	Japan
Care Model	Professional care	State-led community care	Integrated community care
Resident Role	Recipient → participant	Mobilized → co-producer	Participant / co-producer
Main Challenge	Services ↔ community	Administration ↔ relational care	Sustaining participation
Key Transition	Services → Relationships	Administrative → Caring	Integrated → Sustainable

Five Common Challenges

Shared pressures across divergent systems



Five pressures converge on the community's capacity to care.

The Missing Links

What each system must connect

South Korea

Institutionalized services



Community
relationships

China

Administrative capacity



Participatory &
relational care

Japan

Integrated care
networks



Long-term community
sustainability

Common direction: Service Delivery → Relational & Participatory Care

Building a Caring Community

An East Asian institutional principle



Co-production without withdrawing public responsibility

Policy Implications

Care-oriented local governance in practice

- Organize care around everyday living areas, not only administrative boundaries.
- Enable residents to become co-designers and co-producers of care.
- Connect health and welfare with housing, mobility, food, education, environment, and social relationships.
- Use digital technologies to support—not replace—human relationships.
- Recognize formal, informal, and migrant care work socially and economically.

Goal: strengthen the relational capacity of communities to care for one another.

Conclusion

From development-oriented to care-oriented self-governance

Old Question

How can we develop
our community?

New Question

How can we continue to care for
one another while living together
in a shrinking community?

***Community sustainability should be measured by
collective capacity to care—not only by capacity to grow.***

From Shrinking Communities to Caring Communities

The future of a shrinking community depends less on its capacity to grow than on its collective capacity to care.

Thank you · Questions & Discussion