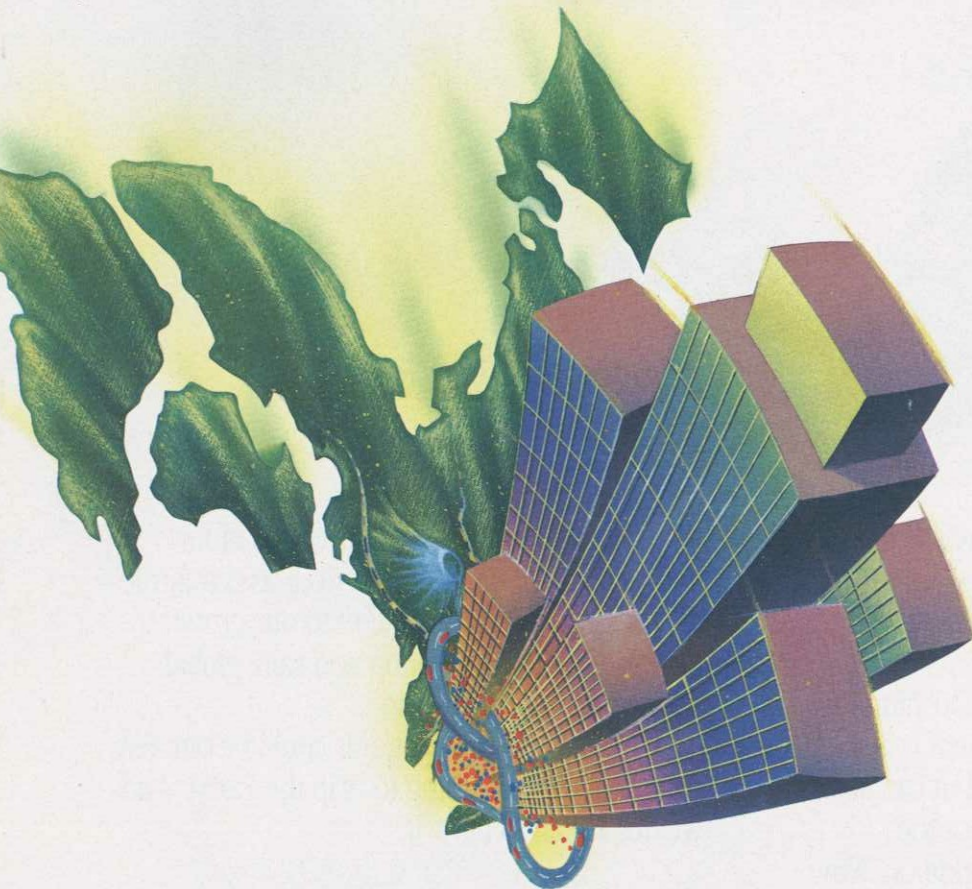


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## ollapsing of Its Own Weight?

By Yojo Nakao



Tokyo, already an overweight megalopolis, is still growing and getting uglier. The people who live there are weary of their environment. Nevertheless, people flock to Tokyo from smaller cities, towns and villages to be absorbed into the pandemonium of the megalopolis. Tokyo has the power, money and magnetism to lure people of all stripes. Tokyo is the Gargantua with many inhuman faces. This mosaic examines eight of these faces.

### Commuting

Some 20 kilometers to the west of central Tokyo is Fujisawa—a quiet residential district with a somewhat unusual Sunday morning ritual for many of its people: lining up before dawn at the train station to buy the next week's tickets for the Shonan Liner train. Tickets do not go on sale until 7:30, but people are lined up and waiting well before then because the Shonan Liner is a commuter train with reserved seats.

Yet not all those in the line intend to ride the train themselves. There are some businessman-types, but there are also a lot of housewives and even some children standing in line.

There are 170,000 people who commute from Fujisawa to Tokyo every day, and it is only the very lucky ones that get to sit down. Most of them battle the standing-room-only crowds as the trains lurch from stop to stop. That is why these housewives and children are here in line trying to get an extra advantage for their breadwinners, trying to make things a little easier on Dad.

It has long been the fate of Japan's "corporate warriors" to work long hours and sacrifice their family life for the company. Here in Fujisawa, the corporate warriors have drafted their retainers into the fight. There are no civilians in this war. Yet it is only 140 people who will be able to buy the week's reserved seats here. That is less than 0.1% of Fujisawa's commuters. The other 99.9% have no

choice but to fight the crowd, for Tokyo is the center of Japanese politics, business, culture, and virtually everything else. Tokyo is where it is at, and you have to be in Tokyo to be anything—so much so that this obsessive concentration on Tokyo has given rise to a whole range of problems and people have started to wonder if there is not some better way to do things.

Every day, there are nine million businesspeople, students and other people who commute to and within Tokyo. Commuter trains are typically filled to 250% of capacity. At mammoth Shinjuku station, used by 1.5 million people every day, there are 50 railway employees on the Yamanote loop line platform every morning pushing, pulling, and trying to make sure everybody gets on a train. Unfortunately, this brute force is about the only response that has been devised to Tokyo's rush hour traffic.

## Hotels

It is not only the long, crowded commute that makes things hard on the Japanese businesspeople. Even those people who are stationed outside of Tokyo often have to come into the city on business—and they find it extremely difficult to get a hotel room.

There are, of course, no-frills hotels for businesspeople. One company in the Ota-ku section of Tokyo that handles reservations for them has 100 hotels with a total of 3,000 rooms online in the reservations system. The whole point of this shared reservations system was that it would make it easier to match vacancies with hotel-seekers, since a vacancy at any of the hundred would show up on the screen and could be assigned right away. But now there are no vacancies. There is a long waiting list instead. And people have to call in at least three weeks ahead to have even a chance of getting a room.

As a result, it is not uncommon for businessmen to take rooms at Tokyo's "pleasure hotels"—hotels catering to the casual sex crowd and letting rooms by the hour. Likewise, people from outlying areas are suddenly discovering that the hostels their home prefectures have in Tokyo—hostels that used to be reserved

for local civil service personnel—are now being occupied by businesspeople who appreciate their low rates and convenient locations.

Companies have taken to booking blocks of rooms and just holding them for use as the need arises. In Okachimachi, only five minutes by train from Tokyo station, there is a no-frills businesspeople's hotel that has been nicknamed "the MEI Dorm" because there are so many people who stay there from Osaka-based Matsushita Electric Industrial. In effect, MEI has long-term contracts on some of the rooms and keeps sending team after team of salespeople up to consolidate its presence in the Tokyo market.

It is 10 p.m. and the five salespeople in the current team are holding a meeting in the hotel lobby. They are all beat, but there is just this one last meeting to get through, and then they can fall into bed, grateful that they have rooms this close to the center of town. "I'm on the road about a hundred days a year. It's tough being away from the family. And it's even worse now that hotel rooms are so hard to find," the team leader admits.

Nobody wants to just sit in an office, and it is widely accepted that the economy will bog down and stagnate unless businesspeople are on the move. But there is something a bit abnormal about the way people flock to Tokyo from all over Japan. Not content with the masses that commute into town every day, this unipolar magnet now sucks people in from all over the country. The city has an insatiable appetite for human energy.

## The Ginza

The Ginza is a strange place. Even though the land prices are so high that it is virtually impossible to break even there, there is no end to the companies that want to locate there. This is something that evokes the "only in Tokyo" response. Ginza land prices are the highest in all of Japan. Every year, the National Land Agency surveys land prices as of January 1 and issues official posted land prices. Last year, the posted land price for Ginza 4-chome was a little over ¥38 million (\$292,300 at the

rate of ¥130/\$) per square meter.

With land prices so high, Ginza shops want to handle high-value-added, high-markup products. For a while, the trend was toward art galleries. More recently, there has been a spate of jewelry store openings. Nearly a dozen jewelry shops have opened in the past year alone.

One major jeweler with head offices in Kobe recently opened a shop on the Ginza with a total floor space of 330 square meters. They spent ¥5 billion on rights and renovation and they are paying ¥8 million (\$61,500) a month in rent—all so they can say they have a Ginza outlet. Of course, the store sells little trinkets such as pearl necklaces going for ¥80 million each. As the manager explained, "Ginza draws a very good customer base. And by good I mean an affluent customer base with ample purchasing power. The Ginza name is such that its consumer watershed is not limited to Tokyo but spans the entire country."

There are also older stores on the Ginza. There is, for example, a little bakery in the maxi-rent Ginza 4-chome district that goes back over 120 years. This is not a store that goes in for bells and whistles, and the clientele appreciates its good, solid, old-fashioned quality. Even though it is estimated that 2,500 people stop by the shop on an average day, the best-selling item is a ¥100 *an-pan* pastry. This is clearly not enough to pay the rent. How do they do it? "The Ginza shop," the manager admits, "is our flagship shop. It represents our traditions and our market presence. So we don't really care whether it makes money or not."

This bakery also has four modern, fully automated factories and a retail outlet network of over 5,000 stores in the Kanto region alone. And one of the reasons why its products sell so well throughout the region is that it has a reputation for being popular on the Ginza.

Along with the jewelry shops, the other main trend on the Ginza recently has been a rush of high-rise, small-space buildings. Referred to as "pencil buildings," they have been built both to take advantage of the high-priced land and to reduce the owner's family's inheritance tax liability. Typically, space in these pole-

like buildings is rented out as shops and offices, the owner taking 20 months' worth of rent as a deposit and charging whatever the traffic will bear. And since there is strong demand both from within Japan and from overseas, a construction rush will continue.

## The Tokyo office

The Hirakawa-cho area is nestled right next to the big concentration of government offices in Kasumigaseki, and it is no coincidence that it is home to most of the prefectures' Tokyo offices. These Tokyo offices serve dual functions. Not only are they eyes and ears gleaning all the information they can from government and business, they are also sources of information—both as lobbyists pushing for more public works spending in their regions and as consultants trying to attract more business to their areas. All 46 prefectures outside the capital have Tokyo offices—even neighboring Saitama and Kanagawa prefectures within easy commuting time from downtown Tokyo. There are also a number of major cities that have offices in Tokyo as well, including Osaka and Nagoya, and the number of cities with Tokyo offices has swelled in the last couple of years.

Nichinan is a small town of only 49,000 people in Miyazaki Prefecture on the island of Kyushu. But in July 1990 it opened an office in Tokyo. Why? Very simply, it was part of a desperate bid to stem the erosion of Nichinan's industrial base and stop the slow death that is pulling 300 people off the town's rolls every year. In Tokyo, the office has been joined by help from nearby Nobeoka to make a total of three people responsible for liaison with 15 major government ministries, agencies and other offices.

"Everything is in Tokyo now," explains Tokyo office director Yasunori Tahara. "It is our job to ferret out the information Nichinan needs and to get it back in time to do the town some good." He is networking, trying to build the bridges that will revitalize his community.

Last November, Nichinan's mayor and a party of local worthies were in Tokyo to petition the Ministry of Agriculture,

Forestry and Fisheries for the early completion of the farm roads in their area. It was budget time, and there were petitioners there from all over the country. This is where Tahara's networking paid off, as the mayor was able to get a meeting with ministry officials and put his case in person. That day, the mayor visited three government offices and about a dozen Diet members. It was a tight schedule, and it would not have been possible had not Tahara already been on good speaking terms with these people.

He works hard at his job and he is good at it, but sometimes it gets Tahara down. "Tokyo is just too big. It's impossible to get a handle on it. It's almost as though I'm in some foreign country, and it's impossible to tell if I'm having any impact or not." Yes, it is like a foreign country, and that is why it is so important that local governments have embassies or at least consulates here.

## Industrial incubator

One of Tokyo's central 23 wards, Ota-ku is also one of the most highly industrialized districts in all of Japan. To get a feel for the area, let's visit the old Ricoh main plant. From the outside, it looks like a very traditional factory. But all of the mass production has been moved outside of Tokyo and this plant has been converted to a research and development center.

Not too long ago, there were rows and rows of young women assembling office equipment on the production line. Today, there are 2,000 people designing new products and building the prototypes to keep the company competitive. As one director explained it, "The Tokyo plant is an incubator for new products, and once they have been developed there, they are put into mass production at factories elsewhere. This is the mother ship—akin to a human being's heart or mind."

It used to be that factories lined the Tama River, in Tokyo on one side and in Kanagawa Prefecture on the other. Almost all of these plants have now been converted from mass production to prototype development.

And to do this, they depend on the huge concentration of machinists, metal-

workers, and other contractors in Ota-ku and neighboring Shinagawa-ku. There are over 8,000 of these shops in Ota-ku alone. These are sub-subcontractors that used to live in symbiosis with the big manufacturing complexes, and they have gone high-tech in a bid to survive now that the mass production has moved out of Tokyo. The giant companies cannot possibly have all of the machine shops they would need, so they subcontract the work out to what might be called their external machining centers.

In the same vein, the smaller machining and other shops work closely together in networks of expertise that enhance all of their abilities. One of the little companies in an Ota-ku industrial park bills itself as making automation equipment for an industrial giant, but it actually does only the design and final assembly. All of the parts are subcontracted to even-smaller shops in the neighborhood. "It is," they say, "almost as though we owned all of the equipment at all 8,000 of the shops in Ota-ku."

Even though the mass production facilities have moved out of Tokyo to sprawling sites elsewhere, Tokyo remains an industrial spawning ground with the research and development facilities to break new ground and with the industrial expertise to produce the prototypes for the future. In terms of industrial output, Tokyo ranks fourth among Japan's 47 prefectures, but the bulk of this output is in high-tech sectors as Tokyo leads the way for Japanese industry. The unipolarity of Japanese industry is unabated.

## Marriage

Tokyo may be productive industrially, but it is not very productive in the marriage department. In fact, there have recently been a surprising number of marriage talk-ins aimed at Tokyo's eligible-yet-unmarried young men and women. For the most part, these have been sponsored by older people—both government offices and nongovernment organizations—surprised and concerned at the sudden increase in single population.

One of the smaller ones was held last fall for single company employees in their



Rush hour at JR Shinjuku Station in Tokyo

late 20s and early 30s. Typically, it saw the women more willing to speak their minds forthrightly: "Who wants to have kids? They'd just tie me down to the house." "I don't have any illusions that marriage represents the ultimate happiness." Although there were a number of men who expressed very positive views on marriage, they were soon overwhelmed by the women's skepticism and even downright rejection of it.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare's Institute of Population Problems reports that there has been a gradual increase in the percentage of the population that is unmarried—and that this is especially conspicuous in Tokyo. In 1985, 43.4% of all women aged 25 to 29 and 40.1% of all men aged 30 to 34 were unmarried in Tokyo, both of which numbers are over 12 percentage points above the national average. Nearly half of the young men and women of marriageable age in Tokyo are unmarried.

One of the major factors in the higher percentage of singles in Tokyo is that more and more women are becoming active outside of the home. In fact, it could well be argued that the biggest change in Japan since the war has been in the enhanced social status and role accorded women. In 1991, for the first time ever, a higher percentage of female than male university graduates found jobs immediately upon graduation. And few women who have gotten good jobs and found that

they can support themselves see any reason to get married right away.

Shortly after the war, there was a very popular radio drama (and later movie) called *Kimi no Na wa*. This was the tale of a lass who had married the man her parents wanted her to and how she overcame innumerable obstacles on the way to divorcing her husband and living happily ever after with her true love. It was immensely popular, especially with housewives. Last year, NHK, Japan's public broadcasting network, decided to revive this story for its morning television slot of 15 minutes. Unexpectedly, the series fell flat on its face.

The first time around, the story was playing to a vast audience of women who had given up their dream of true love for the more pedestrian path of arranged marriage and stability. These people identified with the heroine and shared her trials as she sought to forge an individual identity for herself and to break new ground as a liberated woman.

Today, the audience is women who married the men of their choice. And if they are not married, they still have no trouble finding a job and making a living. At least in Tokyo, there is no social pressure to get married. So why should the heroine have acceded to her parents' wishes and married someone she did not want to marry? Rather than looking valiant, she looks weak. This is not someone the audience can identify with.

Adding to the argument against marriage, Japan remains a male-dominated society in which very few two-income families are also two-homemaker families. So if a working woman does decide to get married, she faces the problem of either having to give up her career or take on double duty as both income-earner and homemaker. She goes from freedom to slavery. And having kids is almost sure to be incompatible with a career outside the home.

Tokyo women have the freedom to remain single, but they do not yet have the freedom to get married and stay active members of society.

## Desolation

Desolation is the other side of Tokyo's attraction, and it occurs in areas that have been sucked dry by Tokyo's magnetic pull. With Japan's stunning postwar economic growth, people have poured into its major urban centers, giving rise to urban crowding and rural desolation. This is the inevitable by-product of the unipolar concentration on Tokyo.

Last November, the National Council of Mayors met in Tokyo. Much of the talk was of development and desolation. To cite just a few of the many comments made: "We really would like to attract some big companies to stem the population drain. But I'm not sure we have the workers they need any more," said the mayor of a small town in Yamaguchi Prefecture.

"Tokyo talks about decentralization and leaving more for the outlying regions, but the only thing they've left us is our old people," said the mayor of a small island off the coast of Kagoshima Prefecture. "I have the feeling that we have passed the point of no return and that our hamlets no longer have the critical mass they need to be viable," lamented the mayor of a little town in snowbound Aomori Prefecture.

Mayor Shigeki Sekiguchi of Onishi, a small town in Gunma Prefecture about 80km north of Tokyo, seemed to sum up the mood of the conference with his comment that, "Tokyo has taken our water. They've taken our young people. And

now they're stealing our land for their damned golf courses."

Onishi is a classic case study in desolation. In 1968, it lost 300 households when the land they were living on was flooded by the construction of a giant dam to provide water for thirsty Tokyo. Today, it has a population of only 8,400—down 26% from what it was a quarter-century ago. Fully 80% of the town's land area is mountains and forests, but the forestry industry has been in the doldrums because of the energy revolution and the town's young people have to go to Tokyo to find work.

And now the town is besieged with resort development projects for building golf courses and summer homes for moneyed Tokyoites. However, Sekiguchi says the town intends to approve only one of the four golf course plans that are before it. "Letting Tokyo money build these golf courses would just create pockets of extraterritoriality in the township and make it impossible for us to generate any meaningful development plans for Onishi," he explains.

Last year, Sekiguchi unveiled his own plan for revitalizing the area and making better use of its natural resources. As he outlined it to the townspeople, he wants to create an attractive community landscape like that lining the Romantic Road in southern Germany. If this can be done, he argues, it will attract younger people who want to put down roots in the area and the town can develop a creative vitality that will sustain its economy in the years ahead.

Half of Japan has lost a quarter or more of its population over the last 25 years. Today these ghost townships are home to only 6% of the Japanese population. The over-concentration on Tokyo has clearly been perilous for other towns and villages, and there is no time to be lost in rectifying this dangerous imbalance.

## Deserted city

Taito-ku is one of Tokyo's old-time districts that developed with people living close to their work. Typical is Okazu-yokocho, a shopping street that has about 60 little shops selling good things to eat.

Because this street abutted on neighborhoods chock-full of cottage industry, its stores sold not just raw ingredients but lots of ready-to-eat take-out food for the dinner table. The street prospered along with the community.

Recently, however, a change has come over Okazu-yokocho. Many of the shops that used to sell individual dishes for the table now sell *bento* box lunches, and some have shut up shop altogether. Where there used to be four tofu shops, there is only one today. The machine shops and cottage industry have been replaced by office buildings—the housewives who used to buy things for the dinner table by businesspeople who buy lunch here but go home for late dinners.

Today, Taito-ku has a total population of 160,000—half of what it once was and declining by about 2,000 a year. As the onslaught of office buildings has spread from Chiyoda-ku and the other central wards to peripheral areas such as Taito-ku, land prices and rents have both soared and residents have found they can no longer afford to live here. In a bid to keep families from moving out of Taito-ku, the ward has offered rent subsidies of up to ¥50,000 (\$385) a month to families with children, on the condition that they stay in Taito-ku even when they move.

The Oguras are looking forward to their second child, and they have applied for a rent subsidy to help them move out of their crowded two-rooms-with-kitchen apartment to something a little bigger. As Tomoya Ogura says, "I have the feeling I'm working and working just to pay the rent. Even if we get the full subsidy of ¥50,000 a month, we'll still have to find at least double that to rent any place good in this neighborhood."

Counting on the subsidy, the Oguras went apartment-hunting, but all they could find were rental units in high-rise, high-priced condominiums. They finally settled for a three-rooms-with-kitchen house at ¥175,000 (\$1,350) a month. They will stay, but it becomes harder for people to live here even if their rent is subsidized.

There exists an office building in Taito-ku that looks very much like a condominium. And little wonder. That is what

it started out as. But since office rents are now about double apartment rents, the builder did some quick arithmetic in mid-stream and decided it would be better to turn this half-built shell into an office building.

Amazed that not even apartment buildings are profitable any more, the Taito-ku authorities asked the developers to set aside at least some of the units as apartments. But the developers argued that if people lived in the building they would want a separate residential entrance, they would need bicycle racks, and all of the extra costs would make the rent so expensive that nobody could afford to live there anyway. After a lot of pushing and cajoling, the authorities finally got some residential units included—only to see 30% of them stand vacant. What has become of the empty apartments? They are being used as storage space for the offices in the building.

Tetsuzo Toda, head of the Taito-ku City Planning Department, lamented, "We used to have warm communities, and now they are all turning into cold business districts. People don't really want to leave, but they don't have any choice. I wish there was something we could do about it, but I really wonder how much the neighborhood and ward governments can do to stem this ebbing tide."

Downtown Tokyo is already busy during the day and deserted at night—a childless zone where no families live—and this pattern is rapidly spreading outward. There seems to be no stopping the concentration of economic and political power in Tokyo, but this same concentration is driving out the people who make Tokyo a great city and inducing urban dry rot.

Tokyo today stands at a critical time of decision. Will it regain its human vitality and thrive, or will it continue its present slide until it is too late? The answer is up to Tokyo itself.

*Yozo Nakao is a chief producer in the News Department of NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).*