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International Political Science Review 2009 30: 565

DOI: 10.1177/0192512109352292

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Understanding Japanese Politics from a Local Perspective

YUSAKU HORIUCHI

BOOKS REVIEWED

Imai, Akira (2008). *“Heisei Dai Gappei” no Seijigaku* [Politics of Major Municipal Mergers in Heisei Era]. Tokyo: Kōjinsha.

Machidori, Satoshi and Soga, Kengo (2007). *Nihon no Chihō Seiji: Nigen Daihyō-sei Seifu no Seisaku Sentaku* [Japan’s Local Politics: Continuity and Change in the Presidential System]. Nagoya: University of Nagoya Press.

Taniguchi, Masaki (2004). *Gendai Nihon no Senkyo Seiji: Senkyo Seido Kaikaku wo Kenshō Suru* [Electoral Reform in Japan]. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.

Keywords: • Japan • Local politics • Subnational politics • Municipal mergers
• Electoral reform

1. Introduction

Japanese politics is by no means a new subject to research for political scientists. Over many decades, scholars have written numerous books and journal articles in English on Japanese politics. Some are specifically aimed at understanding political and policy processes in Japan, while others use Japan as a case study, often in comparison with other countries, to develop and refine broadly applicable theories. This voluminous literature in English has greatly improved our understanding of many issues and problems with respect to contemporary Japanese politics.

There still remains, however, a dimension to contemporary Japanese politics not fully investigated in the existing literature published in English; that is, a wave of important political changes taking place at local levels in Japan. Local politics was indeed on the active research agenda until the 1980s (see, for example, Reed, 1986; Samuels, 1983; Steiner, 1965; Steiner et al., 1980). In the past two decades, however, most scholars of Japanese politics have mainly studied political dynamics at the national level and, in particular, political changes since

the early 1990s – the breakup of the dominant party (the Liberal Democratic Party, LDP), the end of one-party dominance, the causes and consequences of the electoral reform in 1994, a sequence of political realignments, and changes in policy-making processes and policy outcomes (see, for example, Horiuchi and Saito, 2003; Pekkanen et al., 2006; Reed, 2003; Reed et al., 2009; Reed and Scheiner, 2003).¹ The historic victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) in the national elections of August 2009 will no doubt stimulate many scholars to analyze the causes and consequences of this event for some time to come. Of course, giving scholarly attention to such national-level politics is no ground for criticism, but nevertheless it is important not to assume that no new developments have occurred at the subnational level since the 1980s and/or that subnational-level politics is irrelevant to understanding the changes in contemporary Japanese politics since the early 1990s.

In this article, by reviewing three recent books written in Japanese by Japanese scholars (Imai, Machidori and Soga, and Taniguchi), I intend to shed light on underinvestigated important political issues at the subnational level. They include the roles of prefectural political actors in the policy-making process, the political origins of drastic municipal mergers over the last decade, and the responses at the subnational level to new incentive structures that originated in the reform to the electoral system for Lower House elections.

Before reviewing the books, let me briefly explain the basic structures of Japanese subnational governments and electoral systems. Under the unitary national government, there are 47 prefectures, each of which has a government with a popularly elected chief executive (i.e. a governor) and legislators in a unicameral prefectural assembly. Under the prefecture governments, there used to be more than 3,200 municipalities until 2001. As a result of drastic municipal mergers, the number of municipalities dropped sharply to 1,806 municipalities (as of April 1 2009). As in the case of the prefectural governments, each municipal government has a popularly elected chief executive (i.e. a mayor) and members in a unicameral municipal assembly. While governors and mayors are elected under the simple plurality voting system, all prefectural and municipal assembly members are elected under the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system with a mixture of single-member districts (SMDs) and multi-member districts. The first-order national elections – Lower House elections – used the SNTV system in all postwar elections until 1993, with the district magnitude (i.e. the number of seats) ranging from one to six. The electoral reform of 1994 replaced this with a combination of the plurality system with 300 SMDs and the closed-list proportional representation system.

These institutional arrangements constitute the underlying determinants of behaviors and outcomes in contemporary Japanese politics. With a mind to their relevance, in the following sections I will introduce the main findings, arguments, and limitations of each book and discuss some avenues for future research.

2. Roles of Local Politics in Policy-Making

Machidori and Soga focus on “the most prominent institutional feature of subnational governments in Japan” (p. 1), which is the fact that each prefectural government operates as a presidential system – or what they call the “dual representation system” (*nigen daihyō-sei*) – where a governor and the legislators

are separately elected. Under this institutional setting, they argue, governors' partisanship and major political parties' seat shares in prefectural assemblies *interactively* affect the composition of the revenues and expenditures of prefectural governments. Based on in-depth historical descriptions, case studies, and statistical analysis of their original data on postwar governors and prefectural assembly members, they further argue that these effects are conditional on incentives and constraints under the "dual representation system," as well as on various contextual factors (e.g. the socioeconomic environment, intergovernmental relationships, and the preferences of voters).

Machidori and Soga attempt to challenge the dominant view that subnational politics, and particularly politics within subnational assemblies, do not affect the processes of making and implementing public policies.² There are four widely believed reasons for this view: subnational governments have limited powers and fiscal resources granted by the central government; the administrative branch of subnational governments is under the strong control of the central bureaucracy; subnational politicians have superior-subordinate relationships with national Diet members; and subnational assemblies are particularly weak institutions under the "dual representation" system (pp. 24–5).

Their empirical analysis casts serious doubt on the conventional wisdom. Specifically, by dividing the post-1960 period into three periods, each of which covers roughly 15 years, they show the following intriguing empirical patterns. During the first period from 1960 to the first half of the 1970s, many reformist (*kakushin*) governors – socialist or communist governors – were elected, while the LDP dominated both the national Diet and prefectural assemblies. In this period, the major issue at stake was whether to (further) promote economic growth or to distribute more resources to the socially and economically disadvantaged. Prefectures with a reformist governor tended to pursue the latter, while the political parties in prefectural assemblies, irrespective of legislators' ideological orientations, tried to push economic growth and increase pork-barrel spending.

As a result of the end of high economic growth in Japan and other significant changes in the international political economy since the mid-1970s, such as the oil shock in 1973, many prefectural governments subsequently faced rapidly aggravating budgetary problems. In this second period, lasting until the 1980s, centrist parties or even reformist parties formed "band-wagon" (*ainori*) coalitions with the LDP and collectively supported conservative governors. While prefectural assemblies still continued to pursue "something-for-everyone" spending policies, the governors attempted fiscal reconstruction in cooperation with the bureaucracy.

In the early 1990s, both international and domestic contextual factors changed dramatically. The end of the Cold War nullified conservative-reformist ideological conflicts. In 1994, Japan changed the electoral system for Lower House elections. The collapse of the "bubble economy" in 1990–91 triggered prolonged economic stagnation and a deepening fiscal crisis. Given these changes, during the third period since the 1990s there have been increasing numbers of governors without any formal endorsement from political parties (*mutōha chiji*) and governors from the DPJ.³ While non-partisan governors typically preferred "small" government and tried to reduce the size of expenditures, DPJ governors sought to expand it. Another notable feature of this period is that many policy issues were politicized, therefore increasing tensions between governors and legislators, as well as between parties.

Machidori and Soga's analysis is systematic and their findings are supported by rich quantitative and qualitative data. Accordingly, they convincingly demonstrate how governors and prefectural legislators have affected policy outcomes and refute the conventional wisdom that subnational politics does not matter in Japanese democracy. It is no doubt the most comprehensive analysis of the postwar subnational political economy in Japan.

There are always some limitations, however, even in an excellent scholarly piece, and Machidori and Soga's book is no exception. They maintain the importance of the "dual representation" system of prefectural governments, but I am still not sure whether this is the root cause of policy variations at the subnational level. In fact, methodologically speaking, it cannot be an independent *variable* because it has no *variation* across space and time. What affects the variation in prefectural governments' revenues and expenditures is, as clearly indicated by their regression models, a set of variables measuring the partisanship of governors and the seat shares of political parties in prefectural assemblies. These political variables themselves and their effect parameters are in turn assumed – but not sufficiently shown with empirical analysis – to be a function of various contextual factors, which are not necessarily institutional. For this reason, it seems a bit of a stretch for Machidori and Soga to claim that their study makes a contribution to the literature of comparative institutional analysis.

To follow up their ambitious project and conduct further research, we should investigate those factors that have affected postwar gubernatorial and prefectural assembly elections and coalition-building processes. Specifically, we need to examine various questions, such as the following: Under what conditions did subnational governments become "divided" or "united"? Why did reformist governors gain support in the 1960s and the early 1970s when conservatives were dominant in both national and subnational legislatures? Why did many parties collectively support a single candidate (*ainori kōho*) during the 1980s and the 1990s, when the LDP held a bare majority in the Diet? Why are a growing number of non-partisan governors gaining voters' support, while national-level politics is converging to a (nearly) two-party system? To examine such unsolved puzzles, it would be perhaps useful to build testable hypotheses based on the extensive literature of "divided governments" (e.g. Fiorina, 1992), to which Machidori and Soga do not sufficiently refer.

It would also be fruitful to examine whether and how the Lower House electoral reform affected electoral and coalition politics, as well as policy processes, at the prefectural level. A notable feature of Japan's electoral reform in 1994 was to abolish the SNTV system for Lower House elections, while maintaining it for subnational assembly elections. This implies that national and subnational-level legislative candidates may now face different incentive structures, such as *centripetal* incentives under the SMD system vs. *centrifugal* incentives under the SNTV system (Cox, 1990, 1997: 228–30; see also Horiuchi and Natori, 2009). How this "partial" reform of a nation's overall (i.e. national and subnational) electoral system affected electoral and policy outcomes has not been sufficiently studied in the literature.

3. Politics of Municipal Mergers

While Machidori and Soga focus on political economy at the prefectural level, Imai examines an important change that recently took place at the municipal level.

In Japan, as briefly mentioned earlier, the number of municipalities decreased from more than 3,200 at the beginning of 2000 to around 1,800 by April 2006. It was the third wave of major municipal mergers in Japan's modern history. During the first wave (1888–9), the Meiji government established a modern system of governance at the local level by integrating small village clusters into roughly 15,800 municipalities. The second wave (1953–61) further reduced the number of municipalities to about 3,400. The number of municipalities stayed stable during the last four decades of the 20th century, before the third wave began in 1999. In this third wave of municipal mergers (hereinafter referred to as the merger), the Japanese government introduced financial incentives to reward municipalities that would sign merger contracts by the end of March 2006.

The stated objectives of the merger were to improve efficiency in public administration and to cut budget deficits. On the basis of his interpretive research with careful documentary analysis and process-tracing, Imai argues, however, that national-level politicians, particularly LDP leaders, initiated and promoted the merger for political reasons. His hypothesis is the following: "What national-level politicians unconsciously pursued through the merger was to dissolve municipality-level politics [*jichitai-seiji*] and to centralize political power to national-level political parties" (p. vi).

This is the first comprehensive book on the politics of the recent municipal mergers in Japan. After describing the history of the merger (Chapter 1), Imai examines municipalities' responses to the politically motivated merger (Chapter 2); the "local autonomous unit" (*chihō jichi soshiki*) legalized during the merger process, its relationship with the electoral system used in municipal assemblies, and its problems (Chapter 3); the impacts of the merger on the Upper House elections (Chapter 4); and people's attitudes toward the merger based on various surveys (Chapter 5). Based on such a multidimensional analysis, Imai argues that although the merger was highly politicized, it was neither strategic nor carefully planned. As a result, the merger ended up being a complete failure from all perspectives.

Although Imai studies the process of the merger in detail and presents some interesting data, I do not fully agree with Imai's arguments, particularly his core argument that political parties at the national level attempted to play a more significant role in policy-making by merging municipalities and breaking up traditional grass-root policy networks. Imai's argument does not fit with the fact that each municipality's willingness to merge with neighboring municipalities was heterogeneous and that more than 1,200 municipalities decided *not* to merge with others. This intra-country variation can only be explained by attributes that vary across municipalities. Various pieces of empirical evidence Imai uses to support his core argument also seem weak. For example, Imai interprets the declining percentage of municipal politicians without formal affiliation to a political party (*mushozoku giin*) as being a result of the effort of political parties to centralize their organizational structure, but the relationship between the declining percentage and the parties' intention is unclear.

In sum, Imai presents an interesting hypothesis but it is still not sufficiently tested empirically. In further examining the causes and consequences of the merger, I would suggest that future researchers pay attention to broader political changes since the 1994 electoral reform. My own preliminary analysis (Horiuchi and Saito, 2008) shows that the larger an LDP candidate's winning margin in

an SMD in the 2000 Lower House election, the more likely it is that the number of municipalities (within the district) has decreased since 2000. In competitive districts, the degree of reduction in the number of municipalities was much smaller. This may be interpreted as a result of the LDP's strategy to trim the resources flowing into districts with "excess" LDP votes and to pile up resource bases targeted at attracting urban voters who have neither strong partisanship nor affiliation to traditional political networks but nevertheless are becoming pivotal voters in national elections.⁴ This is an alternative hypothesis, which should also be tested jointly with that of Imai.

4. The Electoral Reform and Subnational Politics

Taniguchi's book is one of many studies on the electoral reform of 1994. Unlike most others, which conduct statistical analysis using district-level data, municipality-level data, and/or nationwide survey data, it focuses on one, and only one, of the 300 single-member districts – the Shizuoka First District. With this limited geographical focus, Taniguchi carefully examines two questions. First, why did as many as eight candidates run for a single seat in the 1996 Lower House election, the first election after the reform? Second, what happened in this district, which was one of the most competitive districts in the 1996 election?⁵

As Taniguchi himself notes, the book follows some well-received studies observing electoral behavior within a specific district (Fenno, 1978; Curtis, 1983). His study, however, is not just well-designed qualitative research based on direct observations and interviews. He also collected a wide range of district-specific statistical data and conducted sophisticated statistical analyses. This is a good example of making both inferences and interpretations by combining multiple data types and methods. It is also commendable that he frames the puzzle by highlighting a gap between an observation (i.e. having eight candidates in the Shizuoka First District) and Duverger's Law, "one of the most famous and most often cited generalizations of comparative politics" (Gaines, 1999: 835), which predicts two-candidate competition in single-seat races under a plurality electoral system. By locating his specific case within broader existing studies, Taniguchi's book makes an important contribution to the literatures of not only Japanese politics but also comparative electoral politics.

Although Taniguchi's book focuses primarily on Japan's national electoral systems and outcomes, I chose it for this review because it is a good case study examining the relationships between national-level political candidates (specifically, candidates for the Lower House election) and local political actors, including governors, mayors, prefectural legislators, municipal legislators, and other locally based organizations. In a nutshell, Taniguchi argues that the ways in which these local political actors responded to new incentive mechanisms under the reformed Lower House electoral system shaped the nature of electoral competition at the level of single-member districts.

More specifically, he gives the following answers to his questions. First, he argues that the introduction of the SMD system lowered a hurdle for subnational politicians to run for the Lower House election. This pattern, which could have potentially happened in any district, is most evident if a single municipality (i.e. a city) constitutes a Lower House electoral district and if there is no dominant political leader at the subnational level. Such was the case in the Shizuoka First

District. Second, he argues that, at least in the Shizuoka First District, while voters, subnational politicians, and local organizations responded to new incentive mechanisms in expected ways (at least to some degree), political parties at the subnational level lagged behind in reforming themselves to adjust to the new rules.

Some unanswered questions, however, remain in his study. The first question is why political parties are so slow to reform their organizational structures at the subnational level. Why do they insufficiently play new roles in nominating candidates, deploying daily political activities, and mobilizing votes during electoral campaigns? As Taniguchi writes at the beginning of his book, according to the political parties themselves, one of their objectives in introducing the single-member district electoral system was to achieve party-centered (*seito hon'i*) rather than candidate-centered (*kōhosya hon'i*) electoral competition. Why did they fail to do so?

In reality, I believe, there exists cross-district *variation* in the degree of progress in reforming local party organizations. Taniguchi's single-district study unfortunately cannot examine any differences across districts. In my own work with Natori (Horiuchi and Natori, 2009), we show that after three Lower House elections (1996, 2000, and 2003) some SMDs reduced the effective number of candidates almost to two, while other districts continued to have a significantly larger number of candidates. We argue that this variation can be explained by the difference in the incentive structure derived from variation in the district magnitude (i.e. one to eighteen) used in electoral districts for prefectural assembly elections. The impact of subnational electoral systems on national electoral outcomes is another underinvestigated area of new research.

The second question is how subnational political actors responded to the Japanese government's incentives to merge with neighboring municipalities and how such responses affected the candidate-selection process in more recent Lower House elections. Taniguchi's study was published in early 2004, before the completion of the most recent wave of municipal mergers in Japan. It is now time to examine the causes and consequences of municipal mergers. In doing so, as I have argued, we need to consider how the electoral system for the Lower House affected the process of municipal mergers and, subsequently, how this affected election outcomes. It should be noted that both district boundaries for Lower House elections and municipal boundaries are redrawn within in a decade in Japan. There should be ample research topics, which can be used to advance theories of political geography and electoral politics.

5. Conclusion

All the books reviewed in this article suggest that important changes are taking place at the prefectural and municipal levels in Japan. More importantly, these changes are likely to be influenced by, and to influence, changes in national-level politics and policy outcomes. As I pointed out in this review, there are still many underinvestigated puzzles and questions with regard to such subnational politics in Japan. With regard to the dramatic government change in 2009, it is particularly worth examining how it was caused and how it will influence politics and policy-making at subnational levels. I believe that examining these questions will improve our understanding of not only Japanese subnational politics *per se* but also the dynamics of contemporary Japanese politics and policy-making processes.

Notes

1. A few books on Japanese subnational politics and national–subnational political relationships in Japan have been published in English recently. They include Horiuchi (2005), Jain (2006), and Scheiner (2005).
2. Less importantly, they also challenge another, rather extreme, view that subnational governments have full autonomy and that their decisions are not influenced by various contextual factors.
3. The DPJ was established by the amalgamation of various new parties that emerged in the early 1990s, including those formed by defectors from the LDP. After the landslide victory in the 2009 Lower House election, it became the largest party in both the Lower and the Upper Houses and its leader, Yukuo Hatoyama, became the prime minister.
4. Whether or not this strategy succeeded or failed is another question. It is important to investigate whether and how the LDP's dramatic seat loss in the 2009 Lower House election are related to the municipal mergers.
5. The vote share of a winning candidate was lowest (only 21.52 percent) in the Shizuoka First District.

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Acknowledgments: The author thanks Matt Linley for proofreading the text.