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Weakness in Japan's Civil Society in the Postwar Era
The Yubari City Case Study

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The end of the 1950s and the early 1960s constitute a period during which Japan's coal industry experienced dramatic change. In 1959, the Japanese government decided to switch from coal to oil as the country's major energy source, and in 1961, the Japanese government liberalized oil imports. In response to the change in national energy policy, coal mining companies in Japan started to rationalize their operations beginning in the 1960s. Because many coal mining regions in Japan had only one major industry, and nearly all other types of businesses in the region were either dependent upon or related to the coal industry, the coal mining industry's decline dealt a major blow to the coal mining regions. When coal mines shut down, the coal mining regions experienced severe problems with unemployment and depopulation. In order to assist the depressed coal mining regions, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) provided the affected regions with a significant amount of financial aid beginning in the 1960s.

In spite of the government's financial assistance, however, most of the coal mining regions were blighted. The typical example of such a region is Yubari City, once the coal capital of Japan's northern most main island of Hokkaido. Although Yubari City was able to solicit enormous government subsidies and loans to build industrial complex sites and tourist sites starting in the late 1960s, the city declared bankruptcy in 2007. By the 2006 fiscal year, Yubari's debt had swelled to 35.3 billion yen, or \$282.4 million (125 yen = \$1; the same shall apply hereinafter), amounting to eight times the city's general account revenue. Such failure is not unique to Yubari, but can be seen in most former coal mining cities.

Why did the former coal mining cities of Japan fail in the restructuring of their economies in spite of generous financial assistance from the central government? This paper examines this question by conducting a case study of Yubari City, drawing on a long-term study of the city. Specifically, this paper clarifies two problems related to Yubari City: (1) the relationships between MITI, the big coal corporations, the municipal government and the residents of Yubari City, and (2) how such relationships affected the results of the economic restructuring of Yubari City. The analysis of this paper is based on a review of: (1) the history of Japanese energy policy and coal companies operating in Yubari, (2) Yubari City's tourism development project documents, and (3) the oral histories or biographies of former miners, directors, and politicians. A case study of Yubari city is an important strategy in investigating the effect of Japanese industrial policy on the former coal mining regions and in generating policy recommendations for areas facing future industrial restructuring.

1. Coal mining industry and Yubari City (the prewar era to 1986)

Yubari City is located in the middle of Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido. The city comprises 294 square miles, of which 89 percent is mountain. The city is approximately 44 miles away from Sapporo, the capital and the biggest city of Hokkaido Prefecture, and 25 miles away from Shinchitose Airport, the biggest airport in the prefecture. A major highway connects Yubari City with both Sapporo and Shinchitose Airport. The population of Yubari City in the 2010 Census was 10,922 persons.

Coal mining in Yubari started in 1888 when a vast outcrop of coal was discovered in the region. In 1889, the Hokkaido Coal Mine Railway Company (later renamed the Hokkaido Coal Mine Steamship Company Limited, and usually referred to as Hokutan Company) was established, becoming the first big coal mining company in Yubari. In 1912, Mitsubishi Mining Corporation (now Mitsubishi Materials Corporation), an affiliate of Mitsubishi *zaibatsu*, purchased the Oyubari Mine Company and became the second large coal mining company in Yubari. The Hokutan Company and Mitsubishi Mining Corporation dominated the coal mining industry in Yubari until 1990, when the last coal mine in Yubari was closed.

Like most "company towns" in Japan, housing and service facilities such as electricity, gas, water and hospitals in Yubari City had been built by the Hokutan Company and Mitsubishi Mining Corporation for employees and their families (Suzuki 2014). When the coal mining companies were operating, their employees and the employees' families used the housing for free, and the services either for free or at much lower than market price (*The Yomiuri Shinbun* 2008).

1.1. Coal industrial policy in Japan

Before and during WWII, coal production was the cornerstone of the Japanese economy because of the need for fuel to facilitate the growth of the industry. After WWII, in order to reconstruct the nation's economy, the occupation authorities and the Yoshida administration initiated a "priority production" policy at the end of 1946. The policy, which was implemented beginning in 1947, gave the coal industry priority in receiving government funds from the newly founded Reconstruction Finance Bank (now Development Bank of Japan Inc., DBJ). As a matter of fact, in March 1948, 33.4% of the total loan balance of the Reconstruction Finance Bank was loaned to the coal industry (Sugiyama 2012).

However, the 1950s saw the transformation of major energy source from coal to oil in Japan. As early as the beginning of the 1950s, major industrial consumers of coal in Japan such as the steel and electricity industries became more and more dissatisfied with the high price of domestic coal and started to convert to cheaper imported oil. The steel and electricity industries demanded price reductions in domestic coal and relaxation of oil tariffs. Aiming at the two goals of improving the efficiency of the Japanese steel and electricity industries as well as improving the efficiency of the domestic coal mining industry, in 1961, the Japanese government liberalized oil imports on the one hand, and in 1962 introduced the First Coal Plan on the other.

The First Coal Plan had two major components. First, the central government decided to provide subsidies to industrial consumers to guarantee their use of domestic coal. The subsidies were used to pay the difference between the price of domestic coal and that of imported coal. Second, the government decided to provide interest-free loans to coal mining companies to “scrap” inefficient mines and “build” or modernize the mines with the greatest potential for efficient operations. This policy was known as “scrap and build” policy. After the First Coal Plan in 1962, the Second in 1965, the Third in 1967, the Fourth in 1969, and the Fifth in 1972, the Sixth and Seventh Coal Plans were introduced in 1975 and 1981, respectively. By the Coal Plans, the governmental program of subsidizing industrial consumers of coal and coal mining companies remained the same until 1986, when the Seventh Coal Plan ended.

Although the central government provided funds to the big coal mining companies to implement the “scrap and build” policy in the 1960s and 1970s, in many cases, the government funds were not used by the coal companies to improve mining facilities, but rather were invested in companies’ other diversified businesses (Allen 1994). In the 1960s, many big coal mining companies had clearly realized the coming demise of the coal industry in Japan, and the main reason that the big coal companies lobbied the central government to protect the domestic coal industry was to solicit as much government funding as possible (Hagiwara 1980). As will be discussed later in this paper, the Hokutan Company – the biggest coal mining company in Yubari City, took full advantage of the Coal Plans for the company's diversification of businesses. Kichitaro Hagiwara, president of the Hokutan Company from 1955 to 1981, had strong ties with the politicians of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and succeeded in persuading the central government to continue the Coal Plans (Hagiwara 1980).

1.2. The coal mining industry in Yubari City

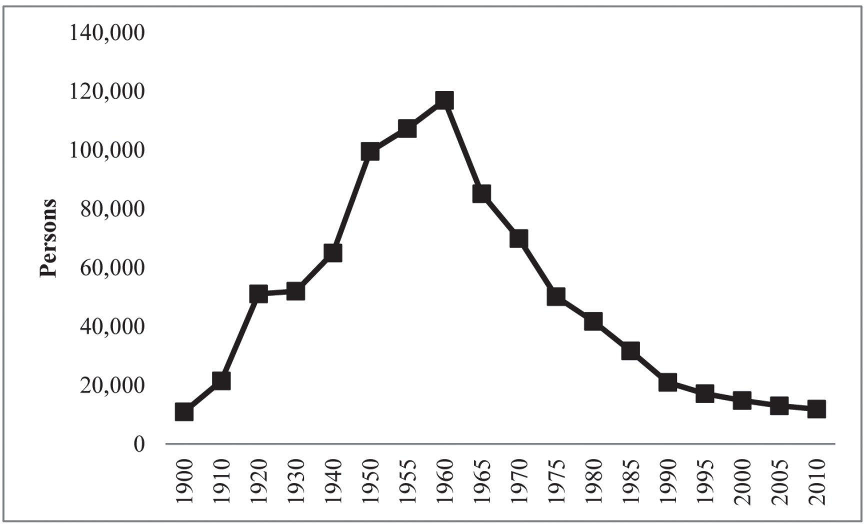
Before WWII, coal production in Yubari City increased rapidly from 762,819 tons in 1910 to over 3 million tons in 1940 (*Table* 1). After WWII, the coal industrial policy in Japan had an important effect on the coal-mining industry in Yubari City. Under the "priority production" policy, both Hokutan Company and Mitsubishi Mining Corporation expanded coal sites in Yubari quickly with funds provided by the Reconstruction Finance Bank. As shown in *Table* 1, from 1950 to 1960, the number of coal mines increased from eight to 17 in Yubari, and coal production increased from less than 2 million tons to over 3 million tons. Supported by the prosperous coal mining industry, the population of Yubari City reached its peak of 116,908 persons in 1960 (*Figure* 1).

Table 1 Number of Coal Mines, Number of Coal Miners, and Coal Production: Yubari City, 1910-1989

Year	Number of Coal Mines	Number of Coal Miners	Coal Production (tons)
1910	6	6,478	762,819
1940	5	NA	3,225,908
1950	8	19,451	1,990,715
1955	15	17,294	2,254,313
1960	17	16,027	3,296,804
1965	11	11,025	4,035,845
1970	9	9,617	3,761,698
1975	5	6,290	3,173,203
1980	3	5,202	2,653,356
1985	2	2,796	1,528,060
1989	1	885	522,000

Source: Yubari City Statistics, 1989.

Figure 1 Population of Yubari City, 1900-2010



Source: National Census.

Even after the Japanese government decided to switch from coal to oil as the country's major energy source in 1959, under the protection of the Coal Plans, annual coal production in Yubari reached its peak in 1965 and remained fairly stable into the late 1970s (*Table* 1). Under the "scrap and build" policy, Mitsubishi Mining Corporation started to build the Minami-Oyubari Mine in 1966, and the Hokutan Company started to build the Yubari New Mine in 1970. When the Hokutan Company built the Yubari New Mine, the company closed three of its old mines in Yubari. The company's labor union, "Hokutan Miners' Union," of which the primary concern was to prevent the bankruptcy of the company and to keep the coal mining industry in Yubari City, agreed the closing of old mines without protest (Masutani 1996, Tamaki 2013). The Minami-Oyubari Mine opened in 1970, and the Yubari New Mine opened in 1975. The two mines were said to be the "build" mines, equipped with the newest facilities, and they became the major mines supporting the coal industry in Yubari City.

However, a gas explosion that killed 93 miners happened in the Yubari New Mine (Hokutan Company) in 1981, forcing the mine to close in 1982. When the Yubari New Mine was closed, the Hokutan Company laid off more than 2,000 workers. Furthermore, the company was unable to pay the back salaries and retirement allowances owed to the laid off workers, which amounted to 12.3 billion yen, or $98 million, as well as 1.2 billion yen, or a $9.6 million debt owed to Yubari City (Kamata 2007, *The Yomiuri Shinbun* 2008). In addition, in order to raise money to pay the back salaries and retirement allowances, the Hokutan Company asked Yubari City municipal government to buy the land, housing (including the blighted wooden housing), hospital and other infrastructure that the company owned at a price of 2.6 billion yen, or $21 million (*The Yomiuri Shinbun* 2008). The Municipal government accepted the Hokutan Company's offer in order to prevent the laid off workers from draining away to other cities.

One of the main reasons for the dire financial difficulty of the Hokutan Company is that its long-term president Kichitaro Hagiwara channeled large amounts of money earned in the coal mining industry into tourism ventures. For example, in 1958, the Hokutan Company established a TV broadcasting company, The Sapporo Television Broadcasting Co., Ltd., and Hokkaido Real Estate Co., Ltd. (now GRANVISTA Hotels & Resorts Co., Ltd.). Hokkaido Real Estate Co., Ltd. purchased the Sapporo Grand Hotel – one of the most prestigious hotels in Hokkaido – in 1962, and purchased another luxury hotel, Sapporo Park Hotel, in 1964.

With regard to the Minami-Oyubari Mine (Mitsubishi Mining Corporation), a gas explosion happened in 1985, killing 62 people. The Minami-Oyubari Mine fired approximately 1,000 employees after the accident. Because of the accident, and because the Eighth Coal Plan of 1986 called for a reduction in domestic coal production, Mitsubishi Mining Corporation finally closed the Minami-Oyubari Mine in 1990. This closure signaled the end of the coal mining industry in Yubari City. When Mitsubishi Mining Corporation left Yubari City, the company donated 1 billion yen, or $8 million, to Yubari City for the city’s restructuring.

2. The Temporary Act for the Promotion of Coal Producing Areas and Yubari City

As early as 1961, when the Japanese government liberalized oil imports, the Temporary Act for the Promotion of Coal Producing Areas was passed to assist coal mining regions in restructuring. This act, though a temporary one, actually covered a period of 40 years from 1961 to 2001, and introduced three measures to provide financial aid to coal mining regions. First, factories that moved to the coal mining regions were eligible to receive tax reductions, as well as subsidies and loans provided by the Japan Regional Development Corporation, a public entity established in 1962. Second, it allowed for the Japan Regional Development Corporation to build industrial complex sites in the coal mining regions to help to bring in replacement industries. Third, coal mining regions were eligible to receive subsidies for implementing public works and regional re-vitalization projects, and receive more tax money allocated to local governments. Based on the Temporary Act, the central government divided the coal mining regions into three groups according to the extent to which they were negatively affected by the move from coal to oil as the nation's primary source of energy. Yubari City was designated as the most severely affected city and was entitled to receive all the aid provided by the Temporary Act.

From 1966 to 1974, the Japan Regional Development Corporation developed three industrial complex sites, of which the total size was 2.5 million square feet, in Yubari City. However, in 1982, there were only 10 factories with a total of 552 employees located in these industrial complex sites. This was approximately 30 percent of the employment anticipated by the Japan Regional Development Corporation and Yubari City (Tanaka 1982). In 1995, 21 factories with 518 total employees were located in Yubari City's industrial complex sites (Ogawa & Shimomura 2001).

Besides building industrial complex sites, the central government and Hokkaido Prefecture provided financial aid to Yubari City to improve the city's infrastructure. The mine closure left a large-scale housing blight that either needed to be demolished or renovated into city rental housing; water and sewage systems and roads and bridges needed to be repaired. *Table* 2 shows the related projects implemented from 1979 to 1994. The total cost of purchasing and repairing housing and other infrastructure for Yubari City totaled 31.3 billion yen, or $250 million. As a matter of fact, 55% of the cost of purchasing and repairing housing, bath houses and water systems, 45% of the cost of consolidating schools and building new school buildings, and 38% of the cost of building and repairing roads and bridges was covered by subsidies provided by the central government and Hokkaido Prefecture.

Table 2 Projects of infrastructure improvement implemented in Yubari City, 1979-94

Project	Total Cost (million JPY)	Financial Resources (million JPY)	
		Subsidies provided by Central Government and Hokkaido Prefecture	Municipal Bond
Purchasing and repairing housing, bath houses and water system	14,991	8,271	6,186
Consolidating schools and building new school buildings	8,798	3,929	4,110
Building and repairing roads and bridges	5,399	2,049	2,966
Purchasing firefighting facilities	612	NA	NA
Tearing down old housing owned by coal companies	1,484	NA	NA
Total	**31,284**	**NA**	**NA**

Source: Tamaki (2013), Mitsumoto (2011).

The paternalistic government structure in Japan provided Yubari City with enormous financial aid for restructuring, but it also had side effects. That is, both the officials and residents of Yubari City firmly believed that it was the national energy policy that had caused the decline of Yubari City's economy, and that the central government would never stop funding the city's public works and revitalization projects (*Hokkaido Shinbunsha* 2009). Basing on such a belief, the former Mayor of Yubari City, Tetsunori Tanaka, who was in office from 1979 to 2003, publicly declared that his role as mayor was to bring in as many subsidies as possible from the central government and Hokkaido Prefecture (Tanaka 1982, Aono 1987). Ascertaining what kinds of projects would be effective in the city's restructuring efforts, as well as determining how projects should be planned and implemented, attracted little of former Mayor Tanaka's interest. The residents of Yubari City, who shared the former Mayor's beliefs, never raised their voices against the mayor's economic and financial policies. However, as discussed in the next section, the belief that the central government would never stop providing financial aid to Yubari was "betrayed" at the beginning of the 2000s.

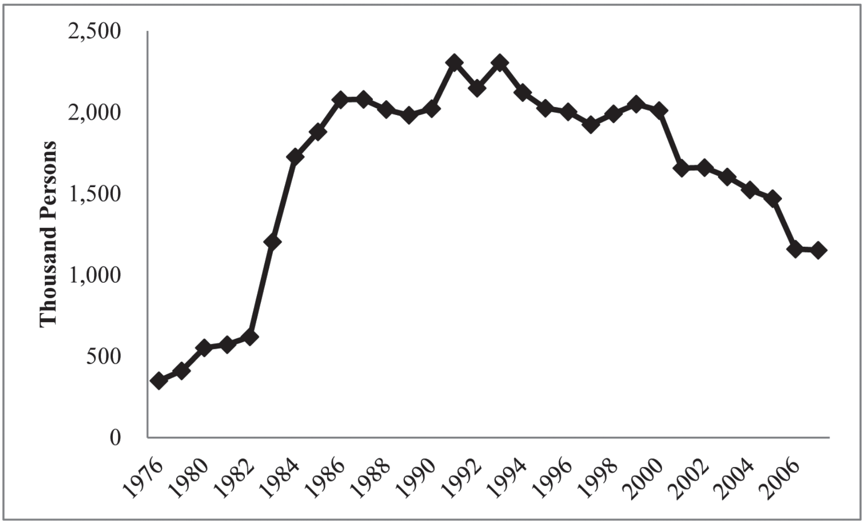
3. Yubari City: transforming from a coal mining city to a tourism city

The dramatic change in coal industry policy in Japan occurred in 1986 when the Eighth Coal Plan was introduced; 27 years after MITI had decided that the major energy source in Japan should be oil rather than coal. The Eighth Coal Plan clearly stated that it was impossible for the domestic coal industry to be propped up enough to compete with imported coal, and it called for a reduction in domestic coal production. The New Coal Plan introduced in 1992 called for further reduction of domestic coal production.

Because the industrial complex sites developed in Yubari City by the Japan Regional Development Corporation did not bring in enough replacement industries, former Mayor Tanaka hammered out a policy to guide the transformation of Yubari City from a coal mining city to a tourism city. From 1978 to 1986, at least thirteen tourist attractions were built and opened to the public (Culter 1999). In 1987, the Act on Development of Comprehensive Resort Areas (Resort Law), which encouraged the development of resorts, golf clubs and theme parks in depopulated and declining regions, was enacted. Under the Resort Law, not only did former Mayor Tanaka start an annual international film festival and build several facilities, including a three-dimensional theater for the festival, but a private developer was also drawn into Yubari City. In 1988, Matsushita Land Development Company (now the MID Urban Development Co., Ltd.) invested 5 billion yen, or $40 million, to build Ski Resort Mount Resui, which was composed of Hotel Mount Resui and Ski Slope Mount Resui. In 1992, Matsushita Land Development Company bought Hotel Shuparo from Yubari City at a price of 4 billion yen, or $32 million.

Few residents of Yubari City agreed with former Mayor Tanaka on his economic policy of transforming Yubari City into a tourism city for two reasons. One is that few residents could afford to use the tourism facilities (Culter 1999). The other is that the tourism industry did not bring in enough jobs, especially jobs that paid as well as the coal mining jobs had. However, during the 24 years of former Mayor Tanaka's administration, few residents publicly criticized his economic policies. The only vocal protest heard was from a citizens' environmental group that opposed building a new ski resort on Mount Yubari, a project jointly proposed by Yubari City and private company Kokudo Keikaku Company in 1989. The environmental group was composed of residents of Yubari City and environmentalist from outside the city. Mount Yubari was famous for its approximately thirty rare species of flowers. The environmental group feared that a ski resort would quickly destroy the natural habitat. In 1989, 25 local protesters joined with 25 environmentalists outside Yubari to start a symposium to call for the protection of the natural environment of Mount Yubari. In 1990, because protests against the projects developed by the Kokudo Keikaku Company burst all over the country, the company lost its enthusiasm in the ski resort project planned in Yubari City. At the same time, the municipal government of Yubari City also lost interest in the ski resort project because the central government started to plan a dam project near Yubari City (Ogawa & Shimomura 2001). The municipal government expected that the dam project, the total cost of which was anticipated to reach 200 billion yen, or $1.6 billion, would bring employment to the city. In February 1991, former Mayor Tanaka declared the suspension of ski resort planning on Mount Yubari (Ogawa & Shimomura 2001).

Figure 2 Number of tourists to Yubari City, 1976-2007



Source: Yubari City Statistics, from 1979 to 2011.

The number of tourists visiting Yubari City reached its peak in the early 1990s and then decreased (*Figure* 2). Because of the decrease in tourists, as well as the collapse of the "bubble" economy that occurred in Japan at the beginning of the 1990s, the Matsushita Land Development Company started to close its hotels and other tourist facilities that were in the red starting in the mid-1990s. The first closure was of the Hotel Shuparo, which had been bought from Yubari City in 1992. In 1996, fearing that the hotel closure might severely damage the city's economy, Mayor Tanaka, supported by the Yubari Chamber of Commerce, decided to buy back Hotel Shuparo at a price of 2 billion yen, or $16 million, and kept it open (*Hokkaido*

Shinbunsha 2009). In 2002, Yubari City Council approved Mayor Tanaka's proposal to buy Ski Resort Mount Resui from the Matsushita Land Development Company at 2.6 billion yen, or $20.8 million (*Hokkaido Shinbunsha* 2009). From 1971 to 2003, Yubari City invested a total of 14.7 billion yen, or $117.6 million, on tourist facilities, 83.5% of which was financed by municipal bonds; 14.8% was financed by subsidies provided by the central government, and 1.6% was financed by subsidies provided by Hokkaido Prefecture (Tamaki 2013).

However, buying hotels owned by private companies did not stop the decrease in tourism to Yubari City (*Figure* 2); on the contrary, it further increased the debt burden of Yubari City. Furthermore, the Temporary Act for the Promotion of Coal Producing Areas was abolished in 2001, which reduced government financial aid provided to coal mining regions. In addition, the Omnibus Law for Decentralization of Powers became effective in 2000. The 2000 Law, which was designed to reform the paternalistic government structure and turn Japan into a decentralized state, introduced financial reforms that had negative effects on the tax revenue of Yubari City. According to the 2000 Law, the central government transferred some sources of tax revenue to local governments, authorizing prefectures and municipalities to abolish the ceiling on the resident tax and create new taxes to increase tax revenue on the one hand (Schebath 2006), and it reduced subsidies provided to the facility improvement projects implemented by the local governments on the other. Yubari City, which experienced severe depopulation, had a high rate of residents depending on welfare, and failed in the development of replacement industries, benefited little from the transformation of tax revenue sources and the authority to create new taxes, and it lost the subsidies the city had depended on.

Beginning in the late 1990s, Yubari City began to issue more municipal bonds than previously, quickly expanding the municipal debt. In 2002, Hokkaido Prefecture refused to give permission to Yubari City to issue new municipal bonds on the grounds that the Prefecture found that the city was in a worsening financial situation. In order to raise money to buy Ski Resort Mount Resui from the Matsushita Land Development Company, Yubari City started to borrow money from banks using illegal methods beginning in 2002. By the 2006 fiscal year, Yubari's debt had swelled to 35.3 billion yen, or $282.4 million, amounting to eight times the city's general account revenue. In 2007, Yubari City declared bankruptcy.

4. Conclusions

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from the Yubari City case. First, as Ezra Vogel pointed out, the relationship between MITI and business in Japan was a cooperative venture whereby the government made suggestions and the private sector participated in the decision making (Vogel 1985); however, contrary to Vogel's (1985) argument, such a relationship did not always lead to successful restructuring of problem industries and regeneration of problem regions in Japan. The Hokutan Company received enormous subsidies to "scrap and build" its mines, but the company channeled much of the money into its tourism ventures and declared bankruptcy, leaving a heavy financial burden including unpaid debt and plighted infrastructures to Yubari City.

Second, the Yubari City case clearly shows a central feature of Japanese urban governance; that is, a weak role played by civil society – groups that exist in spaces between the state and the people, and occasionally offer alternatives to official discourses and values – in policy formation (Garon 2003, Sorensen 2006). Despite the fact that residents of Yubari City did not think the tourism industry would bring in well-paid employment, and that the municipal government's continuing investment in new tourism projects did not stop the decrease in visitors since the mid-1990s, no citizen groups ever publicly questioned the mayor's developmental policy, let alone spoke out against it.

Finally, with regard to the underlying reasons for Japan's weak civil society, the case study of Yubari City shows that the paternalistic government structure in Japan greatly contributed to the formation of a weak civil society. In Japan in the 1960s and 70s, when the country's major energy source transformed from coal to oil and most coal companies closed, the central government implemented policies aimed at relieving the coal companies of the financial responsibility of the social conditions they had created in Yubari City on one hand (Allen 1994), and provided Yubari City with generous financial aid for regeneration on the other. Such policies intensified the habit of the municipal government as well as of the residents of Yubari to leave the resolution of the city's problems to central authorities (Maclachlan 2003). In fact, before the bankruptcy, both the municipal government and Yubari residents firmly believed that the state would bail out Yubari no matter how much debt the city accumulated. The dependence on central agencies for problem resolution alleviated the citizens' feelings of responsibility, as well as their incentive to participate in local management.

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