Regional decline in Japan’s countryside is generally considered a phenomenon closely linked to demographic change. Population ageing, outmigration of the young and rapid population decline can be observed in many towns, villages and hamlets in the non-metropolitan areas, and lead to secondary effects like rising costs for public infrastructure, dwindling local tax revenues, and general economic decline. While the extent of demographic and economic shrinkage in the rural parts of Japan differs considerably depending on whether the area being examined is situated in the periphery or not, the majority of rural areas are affected in one way or another. The problem of shrinking processes and economic stagnation is likely to become an increasingly important field for both regional policy and spatial planning in Japan.

Against this backdrop, research on rural decline can make a significant contribution in assessing the scope of its development and creating a realistic future vision for the Japanese countryside. However, until now not much attention has been paid to the causal factors that have triggered this drastic demographic development. Instead of taking demographic change as an exogenous factor, what seems to be the prevailing view among many decision-makers, the media and researchers alike, a promising research approach is to include the historical and socio-economic determinants in the analysis of current rural change. In order to assess the ongoing processes in rural areas properly, it is crucial to avoid unduly over-emphasizing the explanatory power of demographic variables. The reason is that such a one-sided way of perceiving and explaining the current changes in the countryside – that is, what has been termed ‘demographization’ – fails to grasp the complex background of current rural developments and yields a distorted
overall picture that could give rise to misleading evaluations (Beetz 2007: 238–240) which in turn could easily be used as a pretext for political steps to abandon rural areas that show unfavourable demographic conditions. Accordingly, it is necessary to re-examine, rather more critically, the popular notion that demographic change, as an exogenous factor coming ‘out of the blue’, so to speak, is the principal cause of each and every problem in the countryside.

This chapter is based on the findings from case study research conducted in three rural towns in which rural decline has appeared in particularly extreme forms. The aim was to collect hints in order to formulate working hypotheses about the causal factors behind rural shrinkage and thus to advance towards a general explanation for the observed phenomena on the basis of similarities between the cases. Extreme cases were used based on the consideration that causal mechanisms would appear in the purest form, so that they could be analysed to the best effect.

Unlike in other countries affected by the impact of demographic change, depopulation and economic decline in Japan’s peripheral areas are phenomena that have neither been ignored by the general public nor excessively hushed up by lawmakers and the authorities. Extensive media coverage in television programmes and in the newspapers has contributed to the dissemination of the information that shrinking processes have begun to negatively affect the quality of life in many rural areas. Particularly well-known is the case of the city of Yūbari – a bankrupt former mining town in Hokkaidō that was hit by dramatic population decline – which often serves as an exemplary case of a shrinking municipality and has received considerable media attention for being put under forced administration by the central government (Flüchter 2008: 85–86; Seaton 2010: 2). While media depictions of how people live in rural parts of the country are in general strongly biased and far from showing a balanced picture of life in the countryside, it cannot be denied that media coverage has helped to raise awareness of the current difficulties of rural areas (Elis and Lützeler 2008: 15–16).

The comparatively strong attention that has been paid to the issue of rural shrinkage is possibly attributable to the particularly high speed of demographic change and ageing in Japan, a factor that makes it nearly impossible to ignore the development altogether. Therefore, the severe problems of remote areas are commonly seen as one of the various – and not the least important – aspects of the substantial change that the country is undergoing in general.