Comparative international approaches to the medium-sized city and its customs

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DESCRIBING THE MEDIUM-SIZED CITY IN THE WORLD : A CONCEPTUAL VAGUENESS BUT A COMMON USAGE

French-language research highlights the ineffective nature of the notion of medium-sized cities (*inter alia*, Santamaria 2000, Tesson 2012) : as a geographical object, it is a city category that is defined by default or "indirectly", by excluding small cities as well as the large city that plays a polarising and structuring role on the scale of an entire region. Nonetheless, the expression "medium-sized city" is commonly used in Europe and beyond, such that synonyms can be found in Oriental languages like Japanese.

Two types of naming usage can be distinguished; they refer to two comparable international trends with respect to the meanings given to the "medium-sized city". There is first a more administrative and statistical use of the term, where coming within the category of medium-sized city is initially determined by changing demographic thresholds within each country. Those thresholds are set relative to the size of the urban systems to which that category is applied. For example, a French conurbation that has been granted the status of metropolis would be barely equivalent to a medium-sized city in China. That does not prevent the former from having a far greater influence relative to its political and socio-economic reference framework.

However, in countries of comparable area and with contrasting population densities (the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Japan), the limits of those thresholds generally vary from 10 000 to 250 000 inhabitants.

Next, as is the case in the United Kingdom, the word "town" refers to a type of municipal government of which the competences, political organisation (mayor's term of office, number of elected municipal councillors, etc.), and tax resources are set by national laws covering decentralisation. In that country, there are several examples of urban areas described as "towns" that have not acquired "city" status, leading to vast demographic differences between the cities concerned (from 8 000 inhabitants in Glastonbury to 90 000 inhabitants in Halifax and Hastings). "Town" would refer to a small or medium-sized city or to a borough, whereas "city" would refer to a (large) city. However, in practice, there are towns with larger populations than some cities, like Luton in Bedfordshire (240 000 inhabitants). Regardless of a town's size, it cannot proclaim itself a city, which is a title granted by the Crown. City status does not grant additional competences, but confers a prestige that makes it sought after. The term "mid-sized city" is increasingly used in scientific and expert literature, even if it is often related to ease of expression; it emphasises the fact that the medium-sized city influences a sprinkling of small towns, especially in rural areas, whilst forming part of an urban network dominated by a regional metropolis.

That intermediarity is linked to the history of urbanisation that is unique to each state: many contemporary medium-sized cities are former prefectural seats, fiefs governed by vassals, staging-post towns, and market towns[1] set beside a land or river route, and that subsequently became part of larger administrative entities. It is a phenomenon seen in France, the USA, and Japan, where sometimes the creation from scratch of inhabited conurbations has gone hand-in-hand with objectives of conquest (e.g. the Far West of the USA, and Northern Japan up to the Kurile Islands, between the 17th and 19th centuries), economic rationalisation (exploitation, despatching natural resources, and transformation into semi-finished products and manufactured goods[2]), and social and cultural homogenisation (in order to consolidate a national state).

In such a case, the notion of intermediarity is often associated with that of secondary centrality, which alludes to the various functions that the medium-sized city can concentrate relative to its surrounding urban and rural network: administrative, educational (from primary school to *lycée*, sometimes university or college – an Anglosphere model that also exists in Japan), commercial, and financial (banks and insurance companies). However, that overall description masks very different economic profiles (for example, focused on industry, tourism or culture), with specific effects on the characteristics of their labour market.

For those reasons, studies done in local languages from each country considered here reveal a common problem, i.e. it is almost futile to try to identify a medium-sized city, one that nonetheless has meaning for the elected officials and the inhabitants of the cities concerned. Several magazines continue to publish rankings of the best cities to live, with cities of between 20 and 200 000 inhabitants coming at the top of the list.

Finally, in a context where metropolisation undermines inherited territorialities (Vanier 2013), thus upsetting the reference frameworks of local democracy, the expression "medium-sized city" and the social settings that it evokes (the high street, the central square or market square adjacent to the town hall and the parishes) are back on the agenda. The concerns raised by the increasingly alarming devitalisation of some medium-sized cities offer a reminder that those cities continue to represent the living space of a human (*homo*) idealised by the collective imagination. For the residents of those mid-sized cities (whose average age is rising sharply), the experience of urban devitalisation is mixed in with the decline of traditional ways of living, in which local notables prospered (e.g. executives, self-employed white-collar professionals, and heads of family businesses). Hence, in all the countries considered, it is not rare for the circulation of examples of medium-sized cities in decline to be used by ideological trends that claim to be based on identity, in order to protest against policies of international openness to flows of people and goods. As is pointed out by the rankings quoted earlier, other medium-sized cities resist globalisation paradoxically well, because they embody in some way the preservation of rhythms of life that are deemed more sustainable than those at the heart of metropolises, symbolising constant hyperconnection.

THE MEDIUM-SIZED CITY IN JAPAN : A CATEGORY DISPLACED BY DECENTRALISATION REFORMS

In order to inform thinking on how the notion of a medium-sized city can be understood and appropriated in the discourses of local players, the case of Japan seems all the more interesting for its unfamiliarity to the European public.

Since the 16th century, Japan has been one of the most urbanised countries in the world. Its main island is covered by a mesh of small and medium-sized cities, as well as "castle towns" (*jōkamachi)* like Osaka and Tokyo, which had a population of over one million inhabitants at the end of the 18th century. The institutionalisation of those levels of the urban network was placed on a more explicit footing in 1947, when, with encouragement from the occupying forces, the Local Autonomy Act (*chihō jichi hō*)

1.   In England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the title of "town" was originally attributed to population areas that had been granted the chartered right to hold a market or fair at regular intervals.
2.   Australia has several "mining towns".

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COUNTRY	DENOMINATION (1)	DENOMINATION (2)	CURRENT THRESHOLDS (MUNICIPAL POP.)	EXAMPLES
France	Ville moyenne	Ville intermédiaire	20 000 to 100 000 / 200 000	Vichy (25 279) Perpignan (120 605) Bayonne (48 178) Le Mans (143 813)
Germany	Mittelstadt	Mittelzentrum	20 000 to 100 000	Kaiserslautern (98 000) Tübingen (87 000) Bayreuth (72 000) Oranienburg (48 000)
Spain	Ciudad media	Ciudad intermedia	20 000 to 99 000	Toledo (83 000) Gijona (98 000) Cadiz (120 000)
United Kingdom	Town / mid-sized city	Medium-sized city / mid-sized city	20 000 to 150 000 / 300 000	Plymouth (256 000) Bath (87 000) Inverness (48 000)
USA	Mid-sized city, town	Mid-sized city	50 000 / 100 000 to 300 000	Youngstown (64 000) Durham (263 000) Ann Arbor (120 000) New Haven (129 000)
Japan	*Machi* 町, then *shi* 市	*Chūtoshi* 中都市	10 000 to 200 000	Nishihara (35 000) Iwade (53 000)

established two levels of decentralised territorial government. There are the 47 *todōfuken* (prefectures)[3], and there are three categories of municipalities, *shi*, *machi*, and *mura*, which correspond to the English words "city", "town", and "village". Those municipalities have a mayor (who holds office for four years) and an assembly of elected officials of which the size is, in theory, proportional to the size of the municipality. Their finances come from state grants and their own resources (drawn from taxes on land in particular).

According to article 8 of the 1947 act, a municipality can become a *shi* if it has a population of at least 50 000 inhabitants, if it has the public facilities needed to exercise its own competences, and if at least 60% of its active population works in industry, trade, or "other urban services". Moving from village (*mura*) status to machi status, which is an intermediate category, requires an official population of over 10 000 inhabitants, but demographic and functional thresholds are adjusted with the parent prefecture. In parallel, *chūtoshi* becomes a statistical term equivalent to the notion of an intermediate city (20 000 to 200 000 inhabitants).

The act was reviewed in 1965, and the threshold for a city to request shi status was lowered to 30 000 inhabitants. At the end of decentralisation reforms, at the start of the 2000s, the shi level was subdivided into another four types (*figure 2*): *seirei shitei toshi* or city designated by government ordinance, having extended powers; *chūkakushi* ("core city"); *tokurei shi* or "special city", and *shi* or "city", as it were. Tokyo is not on the list; the capital's borders follow those of its former prefecture, and it is unique in having metropolitan-government status. The *seirei shitei toshi* include 13 cities that are also called *daitoshi* (large conurbation) due to their international influence; they include Nagoya, Osaka, Sendai, Kyoto, Hiroshima, Kitakyushu, and Fukuoka. In addition, several *chūkakushi are considered chihō toshi* or regional capitals, such as Nara, Kanazawa, and Toyama.

The decentralisation reform preceded a wave of mergers encouraged during the term of office of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2001-2006). In response to the population fall of peripheral regions and to reduce public debt, mura and machi in decline were encouraged to bring themselves under larger municipalities, so that at the end of the 2000s, the area

3. Called Prefectures in English, but their functioning is close to that of French regions

and average size of Japanese municipalities were about 40 times greater than their French equivalents. However, many cities retained *shi* status despite demographic losses, especially in rural areas. In October 2011, Japan had 1 722 municipalities (as against over 3 200 in 2000), divided into 786 *shi*, 752 *machi*, and 184 *mura*, plus the councils of Tokyo's 23 special wards.

That development shows how the growth in population and area of Japanese cities in the post-war period, followed by the accentuation of contrasts in settlement between a Pacific façade characterised by an urban continuum and non-metropolitan regions caused a regression of the *machi* category to small cities, with the lowest level of shi covering what would be termed medium-sized cities in France. At the same time, within municipalities that grew through mergers, the initial meaning of the word *machi* (city neighbouhood)4 was reaffirmed as part of movements to promote participatory urban planning (*machizukuri*). In 1998, an act on financing non-profit associations stimulated a process of delegating activities covering maintenance, neighbourhood animation, and mutual help for communities of inhabitants, under the ægis of municipalities of which the state boosted the regulatory powers whilst seeking to reduce budget grants.

4. Organised into neighbourhood associations or chōnaikai, which handled some urban-management tasks (cleaning and tax-collecting) until the Meiji period (1868-1912), during which a system of municipal government based on European experience was gradually instituted.

CLASSIFICATION AND NUMBER OF ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS			MAXIMUM – MINIMUM POPULATION RECORDED IN 2009
Prefectures (*todōfuken*) = 47	*To*, Tokyo metropolitan government (1)		12 576 601
	Dō, a prefecture on Hokkaidō (1)		5 627 737
	Fu, urban prefectures of Osaka and Kyoto (2)		8 817 166 (Osaka) and 2 647 660 (Kyoto)
	Ken, other prefectures (43)		8 791 597 (Kanagawa), ˜ 607 012 (Tottori)
Municipalities = 1 777	Cities = 783	*Seirei shitei toshi*, city designated by government ordinance (18)	3 579 628 (Yokohama), ˜ 674 746 (Okayama)
		Chūkaku toshi, core city (41)	669 603 (Kumamoto), ˜ 290 693 (Shimonoseki)
		Tokurei shi, special city (41)	480 079 (Kawaguchi), ˜ 194 244 (Kofu)
		Shi, other cities (683)	560 012 (Hachioji), ˜ 5 221 (Utashinai)
	Machi (translation of "town" in 1947) = 802		53 560 (Miyoshi), ˜ 1 796 (Yonakuni)
	Mura (villages) = 192		53 560 (Takizawa), ˜ 214 (Aogashima)

Source: The Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (Sōmushō), 2009

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