



# The Role of Local Shops in the Consumer Society: Example of Sekime in Osaka

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### 1. Foreword.

First of all, I want to say that I am to make this presentation as a sociologist, but also I hope I can do so as an inhabitant of Sekime. Sekime is a popular district in the town of Osaka which counts more than 2,6 inhabitants million. Osaka, located in the middle of the Western area of Japan, was the center of commercial activity until World War 2. Osaka developed an independent culture thanks to its commercial spirit. The Osakans formed a particular culture thanks to a spirit of self-confidence, quite independent from the political authority of Tokyo. Sekime, in the east of Osaka, was a borough whose origins can be dated to almost one thousand years ago.

### 2. History until today.

Just as Tokyo, the city of Osaka was almost destroyed by American indifferent bombings during World War 2. US bombings are estimated to have caused the death of more than twenty five thousand people in Osaka. The Sekime's market where one can go nowadays was born just after the war, as a temporary and urgent means to get by. In the beginning, it was a kind of self-managed market, more or less clandestine, as most of the other Osaka markets born after the war. Although it is acknowledged that there were already several municipal markets in Osaka as of after World War 1, which were actually a semi-public organization, they did not have enough capacity to meet the inhabitants' needs, as the distribution system then had been completely paralysed. Coming out of World War 2, the Japanese economy was in limbo. Indeed, Japanese people suffered restrictions, creating the need for alternatives. Trade-oriented and self-confident Osaka contributed much to the birth of self-managed markets. However, the Japanese were poor.

Like other markets, Sekime's was authorized later on, around 1948, only to be controlled by local authorities. A new building was built, a call for merchants was issued. As soon as the inauguration of Sekime's market, a shopping area of Sekime started developping around it. Both kept developping to reach full prosperity in the 1960's. But as soon as the 1970's, the area was subject to stagnation, which then turned to depression, as it was later observed in the early 1990's.

In France as well as in Japan, supermarkets and malls have been considered big threats to small, often family-ran local shops. Indeed, there used to be much more small shops in Sekime. But today, their quantity has dropped to less than half of what it was 10 years ago.

After World War 2, the Japanese economy, following the motto "let us catch up with the United States and exceed them", showed a miraculous growth. From 1955 to 1973, an annual GDP growth rate of 9 %, twice and a half the US rate, helped Japan catch up with the West



faster than expected. It was under these circumstances that Japanese life quickly adopted modern standards. The rise in the Japanese standard of living was also very spectacular. At this time, almost every Japanese had more or less enjoyed the economic growth. During that period, the success of the economy largely rested on the domestic demand. Consumer society then entered Japan especially *via* the large cities.

Supermarkets started popping up all over Japan around 1965. They were used to satisfy the homogeneous requests of a nation in search of uniformity, whose industries adopted standardization and mass production, thus making it possible to lower costs and prices. However, the role of local shops in the district remained crucial.

### 3. The current situation of local trade.

One can rather easily estimate the cause of decline of proximity stores: a major factor is, of course, competition with supermarkets as far as price and product-variety are concerned. These two elements are obvious stimuli for the decline; yet, this problem probably needs deeper analysis to be fully understood.

When they first appeared, supermarkets were a symbol of the American life, i.e. that of a very high life. Many Japanese then envied the Americans' richness, civilization and material abundance. Shopping at a supermarket was thus a symbol of modern life. On the other hand, small stores represented the past. In a supermarket, indeed, all the articles are well laid out and barreled very well. They allured customers. But, strictly speaking, neither the quality of the goods nor their prices were the real causes. It was the image of a certain life-style that was pursued. After World War 2, Americanization spread over Japan more quickly than some had hoped and others had feared: isn't our modern life-style coming from the United States? The prospect that our present is more Americanized than our past but much less than our future cannot be denied. It is a pity but it is a reality that cannot be escaped.

One must consider another factor. At the beginning of the 1980's, a supermarket was open in the Sekime district. One could guess its latent effect only after a few years. The tradesmen of Sekime were rather proud of their competitiveness, quality, price and service. The supermarket caused, slowly but surely, a change in the way people circulated in the district. For example, people would drive past supermarkets to go to the station. The number of people going to Sekime's market slowly started decreasing. It was an unexpected effect. Furthermore, the market of the district was a kind of public and friendly place. In the past, people would meet and have a talk at the morning market. Today people walk across silently in front of supermarkets.

Women's social advancement is an important cause in the decline of local trade as well. In a consumer society, one wants to buy many objects. One must thus earn more money than before. Moreover, since the 1970's, the number of working, financially-independent women has dramatically increased. Formerly, Sekime's market was attended by housewives but, now, most women work during day-time. They go shopping at 6 or 7 p.m., often in the town centre, where they work. On the contrary, in Sekime's market, one can mostly find old



women, who never buy many things. Most Japanese supermarkets are open from 8 or 9 a.m. till 8 or 9 p.m., in the centre town often 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, of course... It is obviously impossible for shopkeepers to compete on such a ground with supermarkets. Even if one claims one does not like supermarkets, actually, one has to give up shopping in small local stores. This is how life goes in a consumer society.

The Japanese economic development generated many large and highly competitive companies. But at the same time, they crushed SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) which were the suppliers of craft products for small stores. Craft products indeed are the local speciality for small stores in the district. Local shops are displays for artisan products, whereas supermarkets offer the same standardized products produced by large manufacturers all over the country. Salted vegetables, tofu, noodles, bread, soya sauce, delicacies, etc...were typical local shops products. But today people buy the same products of the same brand. Moreover, consumers are very much influenced by TV commercials. And supermarkets are convenient and often less expensive. As a result, local shops' survival is more and more in jeopardy: for example, the noodle factory and delicacies factory that used to run until 5 years ago have now both disappeared.

The reinforcement of sanitary regulations is also a disadvantage for small shops and SMEs. For example, if one buys meat at the supermarket, one can easily find the expiring date of consumption. It is compulsory information. However, if one goes to the butcher's, one must ask for the information. Somehow, I feel that the butcher's word is more reliable than anonymous labelling. At a butcher's, the meat is, in general, fresher than that found in supermarkets because a butcher does not cut it in advance but at the client's demands. However, today's consumers rather trust automatic and compulsory labelling. The reinforcement of sanitary regulations perhaps contributed to the modernization of people's hygiene. Japanese consumers became more and more wary of goods without a recognized brand label.

Japan is among the world's countries with the highest life expectancy. However, the fertility rate keeps decreasing: it is currently less than 1.3 child per woman. This is a catastrophic situation. Predictions warn us that a quarter of Japan's population will be made up of people over 65 by the year 2025. In Sekime, most shopkeepers are already over 55 years old. Because of the difficulties and uncertainties of the economic situation, most of them cannot find people to take over their businesses. Their children already chose other professions because the future of Sekime's shops looks very blurry and dark. If this phenomenon is to continue, all the small shops of Sekime will disappear before 2025. Furthermore, shopkeepers do not advertise, nor do they invest any more money in their stores. Their stores thus become old and unhealthy. Every year, less and less people come by Sekime's district.

There used to be many more shops in the Sekime area, including in the Sekime's market. There, one could almost buy anything. But today, one has to go to a supermarket to satisfy their needs. For example, there is no more China dealers in Sekime. The fate of Sekime's market has undoubtedly entered a lethal cycle.



All things considered, one must acknowledge that the decline of Sekime's market is caused by many factors in addition to the quality and price competition with supermarkets.

#### 4. The unreplacable role of local shops

For the elderly and the handicapped, local shops have always been very important. Shopkeepers have also acted as neighbours and friends who would help them. They would know each customer's histories and little secrets: fake teeth issues, hypertension, diabetes, etc. Moreover, butchers and fishmongers are good cooks and, as such, they often give some advice to their clients on the improvement of their diets. For blind people, large supermarkets are gigantic labyrinths. They can find their ways much more easily in familiar, small-scale shopping areas and markets. Shopkeepers are there at their service too.

Today, the youth eats much more junk food than ever before and they get it from supermarkets. As a result, they cannot cook any more without assistance. Small shopkeepers not only sell products but they can teach how to cook. Thus local shopkeepers have a very important role in transmitting cooking traditions. Their role is also positive as far as pedagogy towards children.

Large supermarkets are anonymous areas, potentially dangerous especially for children whereas local shopkeepers in general know the people of their district very well. They monitor what happens in the district and can look after certain people or children. On the other hand, supermarkets are unsafe places for children, hence the need for parents to hire babysitters.

#### 5. Conclusion?

In the consumer society, the unique role of local shops is close to disappearing. If this phenomenon persists, Japan will have to face a reduction of a fundamental support to social life. This is a sad state of affairs. I do not have any solution to solve this critical issue, but I think that Sekime's case can be seen as a shortcut illustration of our global world. Indeed, there are now three Macdonald restaurants near my home. They seem to be full all the time. There are supermarkets constantly filled with customers. People buy way too many things there. Some probably think that our district is very flourishing and dynamic.

Some would probably say that we are quite demanding in comparison to what people suffer in economically under-developed countries. We probably are. But if their future is to resemble Japan's MacDonal'd's type of rich present, then I say that we are misguiding them as this is not the path towards happiness.

I believe that PEKEA can submit a specific remedy.