Japan's empty houses problem

The meaning of homeownership in Japan

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Introduction

Ms. Yamada[1] inherited an apartment in the Aichi prefecture after her parents passed away in a traffic accident in 2000. She lives in Tokyo herself because of her job as a magazine editor and the last residents of the house left about seven years ago. The house has been vacant since. Now, instead of the shades of the trees, branches are reaching the roads; signboard tilt greatly; and rust has corroded the outer staircase (Watanabe 2014). The case of Ms. B is not an exceptional case. Over eight million of these empty houses are scattered throughout Japan.

Because of a rapid-ageing society, Japan is facing a shrinking society in which the relative amount of elderly citizens will increase substantially. Elderly citizens are at larger risk of eventually moving to an elderly care facility or passing away. When their houses become uninhabited or unmanaged, they are designated as an empty house, or *akiya*[2]. In this thesis, I will investigate the question of how this rapid rise in empty houses can be explained from the perspective of the social dimension of homeownership. In other words, what social reasons might cause *akiya* homeowners to leave an uninhabited house unmanaged, instead of selling or dismantling the house?

In the first chapter I will describe the phenomenon of increase of empty houses in Japan in more detail. By analyzing the media coverage of the subject by the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper, I will explain why it can be considered as problematic and what efforts are being taken to reduce their number. I will also explore the reasons why *akiya* homeowners leave their house inhabited and unmanaged, and argue for the existence of a social dimension to *akiya* homeownership in Japan. In the second chapter, I will discuss the conceptual framework of research on housing. Because housing in itself is no established field of study, there are several conflicting views on how to approach the subject. I will discuss these conflicting views on housing research and explain which one I will use in my own approach to investigate the rise of *akiya*. In the third chapter, I will investigate the meanings of housing and home in Japanese society, in line with the approach that I have specified in the second chapter. I will do this by analyzing literature on housing Japan to investigate how the concept of housing and home are expressed linguistically, and to investigate the historical developments of housing in Japan. In the fourth chapter, I will present the results of the interviews I have conducted with homeowners in Japan and compare these results to my findings in the previous chapters.

[1] The name has been changed because of privacy reasons.
[2] The word *akiya* is a combination of the words ‘empty’ and ‘house’ in Japanese.

Chapter 1

The rising number of empty houses in Japan

In Japan more and more houses are becoming uninhabited, unmanaged and uncontrolled due to an ageing and shrinking society. Most cities and prefectures are dealing with a vacancy rate of over ten percent and in total more than eight million empty houses are reported to be found across Japan. In the most severe cases, entire villages are at risk of becoming deserted. In the less severe cases uninhabited houses are scattered across the towns and cities. In this chapter I will elaborate on the issue of empty houses specifically. I will explore the causes of houses becoming uninhabited, explain why it is perceived as a problem and what is currently being done to cope with it. Since this is only quite recently becoming an acknowledged problem, the available literature is scarce, especially in English. To gather information about the subject, I have investigated the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper articles published in 2014 and 2015. I have chosen this timeframe because around this time English articles on the subject started to appear as well.

According to a report issued by the government in 2013, the number of empty homes, or *akiya*, nationwide is estimated to be more than 8 million. Because of the ageing and shrinking society, this number is expected to rise to more than 20 million in 2033 (Martin 2017). That amounts to one in three houses that will be empty by 2033. By then, the baby boom generation will have reach the age of the average lifespan in Japan (which is roughly the age of 84, according to the World Health Organization), thus it expected that the number of empty houses will increase proportionately (Nozawa 2016, 115). In comparison, England has also been dealing with a large number of vacant homes. However this number is not only considerable smaller in size, it has also decreased from roughly 860.000 in 1983 to about 610.000 in 2014 (Murakami 2016, 80). Although 8 million is a large number, according to Kawaguchi (2016) this number may not actually be what it appears to be on first sight. He explained that the number of 8 million is composed of *all* the unoccupied homes in Japan. When you extract the number of second homes, homes meant for sale and homes meant for renting from the total number of 8 million, you're left with a remainder of roughly 3 million. He further argued that these 3.18 million housing units also consist of houses that are part of an apartment building, therefore having shared housing facilities such as water, sewage and electronics. As such, the detached houses, of which the number is about 2.31 million, should be most important to be considered when discussing empty houses (Kawaguchi 2016, 96).

It thus seems important to keep in mind the extent to which housing statistics are "a product of the organization that generates them rather than a gauge of the phenomena of which they appear

to be measures" (Kemeny 1992, 26). Nozawa (2016), however, argued against taking apartment building maintenance for granted. She feared that the ageing of apartment buildings might lead to deterioration and the development of the residential area into a slum-like area. In other words, similar to a broken window caused by vandalism attracting more crime[3], an increase in empty houses in apartment buildings might lead to more vacant apartments which in turn can lead to attraction of suspicious people, failed property management and deterioration of the entire building and surrounding area. She further argued that it is not an easy task to renovate deteriorated buildings. Because of the high costs involved, there has to be a full consensus between the residents involved, and after renovating there are still vacant apartments left that do not guarantee sale (Nozawa 2016, 127).

The problem

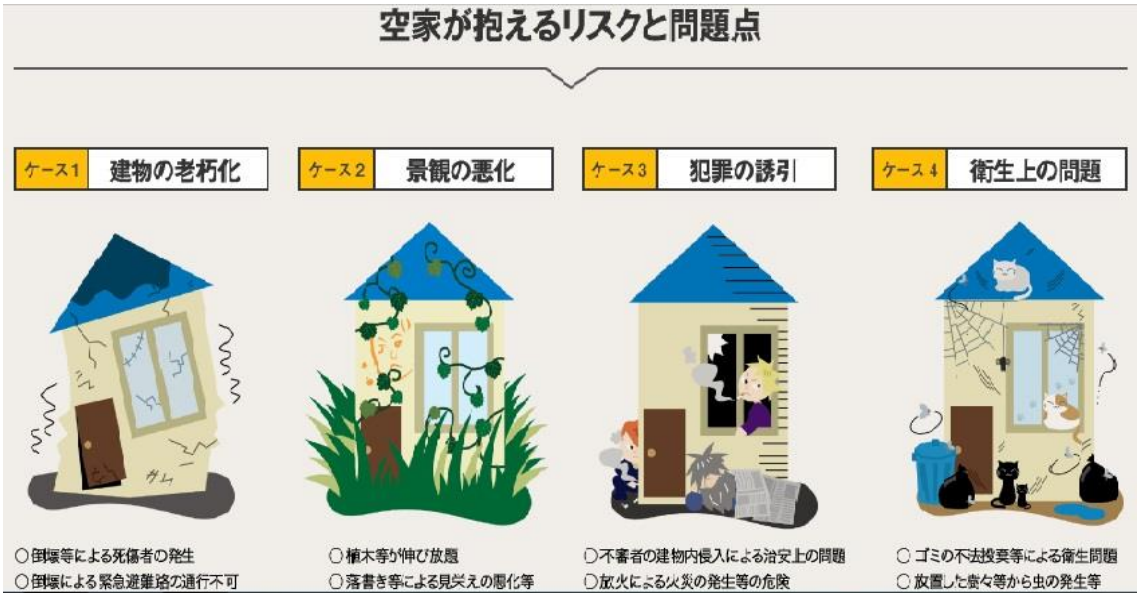

Figure 1. Problems associated with empty houses depicted on the Hankyu Real Estate website.

Much like apartment buildings that are at risk of a lack of management and maintenance, the possibility that standalone houses are not taken care of after becoming vacant is even larger. In figure 1, the dangers of houses becoming deserted and unmanaged are illustrated. The problems associated with empty houses can be divided into four categories. First, deterioration of the house can lead to the possibility of collapse or fire. In the city of Kama in the Fukuoka prefecture, an old and deserted wooden warehouse suddenly collapsed. Although there were no casualties, shortly before a child was playing nearby (Hokao 2014). Another factor contributing to the possibility of collapse in some prefectures is snowfall. In 2006, heavy snowfall in the city of Daisen in the Akita prefecture caused

[3] Although the broken window theory used in the field of criminology is not directly applicable to this exact situation in Japan, the fear involving the growing number of empty houses connects more serious crime and deterioration of the neighborhood to single cases of homes or apartments becoming abandoned.

several vacant homes to collapse. One of them blocked the highway and became an obstacle for traffic (Yamaguchi and Tomono 2014). In Iwamizawa, Hokkaido, there are 90 of the 190 empty houses at risk of collapse when heavy snow falls (Fujisawa 2015).

Second, the house can become overgrown with weeds and vegetation which can make it an unattractive sight in the neighborhood. This can negatively affect the image of the neighborhood. Third, if the house is left unoccupied and unmanaged for a long time, it can attract unwanted guests such as criminals or homeless persons. In cities in the Gunma and Saitama prefecture, large amounts of cannabis have been confiscated. The criminals bought an empty house auctioned for a low place and changed it to cultivate cannabis. In this case the house was obtained through legal means, yet there is also the possibility of *akiya* to be used for criminal activities without the consent of the owner (Urano 2014). Fourth, a lack of management can create hygienic problems. When the house becomes a breeding ground for bacteria, it will also negatively affect the neighborhood.

Another problem might occur when an increase in empty houses influence the effectiveness of infrastructure and overall maintenance of a city. A decrease in population and an increase in empty houses can trigger a process of urban decay. Eventually, infrastructure and public services will need expensive maintenance as well. For example, waterworks that are provided by companies may become neglected when the urban decay of a city greatly affects the profit of a company (Nozawa 2016, 133). Although larger cities are at less risk, small rural villages are already becoming deserted due to a shrinking society and urban migration of the youth[4].

Causes

With a nationwide predicted vacancy rate of about 30% in mere 15 years, what exactly is causing all these homes to become empty in such a rapid manner? As described in a previous section of this chapter, the underlying cause can be contributed to a declining population as a result of ageing. Concretely put, the amount of people to habit homes is shrinking, therefore it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep filling every home. Already since 1968, the total number of houses started to exceed the total number of households. In 1973 this was the case in all prefectures. In 2008 each household could habit 1.15 house ([Nakajima] 2015). Moreover, the proportion of elderly citizens is increasing drastically. As such many elderly people are relocating to elderly home facilities, leaving their previous home unoccupied and unmanaged.

Although these causes considerably contribute to the problem, they are not the only factors causing the vacancy rate to reach such high proportions. The house formerly belonging to the aged

[4] For example, as of 2005 Kamioka merged with neighboring towns to form the city of Daisen..

citizens will be inherited by family members after they pass away. Lack of management by the inheritors is an important factor causing houses to become cases of *akiya* that can cause problems. Every five years, the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications conducts research on land and housing statistics. The most recent issue was published in 2013. In Kawaguchi (2016) the statistics of this research are discussed as well. According to their survey results of the 6063 houses, roughly 5% was already designated as abandoned (Kawaguchi, 2016, p. 98). In other words, in many cases people have inherited a house but are not able to habit it and have no other use for it. Due to a lack of management and maintenance of the house and its surroundings and an overall neglect for a relatively long period, the house will have the potential of becoming an *akiya* that will cause problems to the neighborhood because of the reasons mentioned in the previous section.

According to reseach by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 1108 households responded to a survey dealing with the issue of leaving a house empty and unattended in particular. In figure 2[5], I highlighted the answers regarding the intent of usage of the *akiya* (above) and reasons for the most given answer of 'leaving it empty as it is' which was answered 541 times (below). Among the tendencies towards the utilization of the *akiya*, the most given answers were 'either I or a family member will habit it' (210 respondents), 'I will sell it' (120 respondents) and the most given answer 'I will leave it as it is' (541 respondents). This answer has in turn been further specified directly below it. Among the researched articles from the *Asahi Shumbin* newspaper, the explanations for people who leave an empty house behind were most commonly high dismantling costs, tax benefits, a low change of selling it for a reasonable price and cherished memories of the homes. In the figure the most given answer

空き家の活用意向		
自分や親族などが住む	210	19.0%
住宅を売却する	120	10.8%
借家として賃貸する	56	5.1%
別荘・セカンドハウスなどとして利用する	42	3.8%
空き家のままにしておく	541	48.8%
さら地にして土地活用する	23	2.1%
さら地にして売却する	44	4.0%
住宅を解体し、空き地にしておく	60	5.4%
不明	12	1.1%
総計（空き家をそのままにしておく世帯）	541	100%
空き家のままににしておく理由		
解体費用が用意できないから	112	20.7%
税金対策のため	4	0.7%
物置などで使っているから	208	38.4%
特に困っていないから	130	24.0%
その他	86	15.9%
不明	1	0.2%

Figure 2. Survey results by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

[5] The image contains survey data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications as portrayed in 'Thoughts on akiya'.

was ‘because I can use it as a storage room’ (208 respondents), followed by ‘because I can’t really be bothered’ (130 respondents) and ‘because I cannot pay the dismantling expenses’ (112 respondents). Noteworthy is the fact that ‘For the sake of tax benefits’ was only responded four times, even though this reason in particular was given a lot of attention in the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper articles. Dismantling costs of a house are indeed quite high and there is no guarantee that the remaining ground can be sold for a desired price. A wooden house of 30 *tsubo* (one *tsubo* is approximately 3,3 square meters) will have total dismantling costs between 540.000 and 1.200.000 yen (which is roughly between 4.000 and 9.000 euros) (Kawaguchi 2016, 107). Besides renovating, selling or leasing the house is also an option. However, according to the survey results, a lot of *akiya* owners are considering sporadic usage of the house by either themselves or other family members, or using it as storage. Furthermore, it has turned out to be difficult to locate buyers for houses in some cases, especially *akiya* that are located in the countryside from which it is more difficult to access certain public facilities. A 42 year old man living and working in Tokyo inherited his old family home in a small town in the Fukushima prefecture after his parents passed away four years earlier. He initially thought he was able to sell the land to the neighboring house, but in the end it didn’t sell. The house has now been vacant since. (Watanabe 2014). In addition to the difficulty of finding interested buyers, in a lot of cases home owners base their price evaluation of the inherited house on feelings towards their or their parents’ old cherished home. This subjective price tends to exceed the price it would be able to be sold for in the market, therefore making it difficult to sell (Kawaguchi 2016, 107).

Another reason for leaving the home empty home behind without attending to it, is the earlier mentioned tax benefits. Under current legislation, home owners will pay six times less property tax when their ground has a house on it. As such, dismantling the house would mean that the property tax they would have to pay on the same piece of land would increase with a factor six. Although this reason in particular was prominently mentioned in newspaper articles, in the survey four (out of the 541) respondents actually reported to be the cause of leaving the *akiya* as it is. Of course, there is also the possibility that *akiya* homeowners refrain from giving such a response on a survey issued by the government.

There is yet another reason home owners tend to leave their inherited home as it is. In figure 3[6], similar to figure 2, survey results about reasons for ‘leaving an *akiya* as it is’ are shown for 461 respondents. Noteworthy is the fact that in this figure ‘because tax benefits would disappear’ is responded a lot more times (25.8%). Judging from the results, it seems respondents were able to give multiple answers as a reason. Surprisingly, besides the reason ‘because of the high dismantling costs’

[6] The image contains survey data by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications as portrayed in ‘Thoughts on akiya’.

(39.9%), the most responded answers had to do with either personal attachment to the house, possible usage, or lack of initiative to take action. The reason 'because I can use it as a storage room' was given

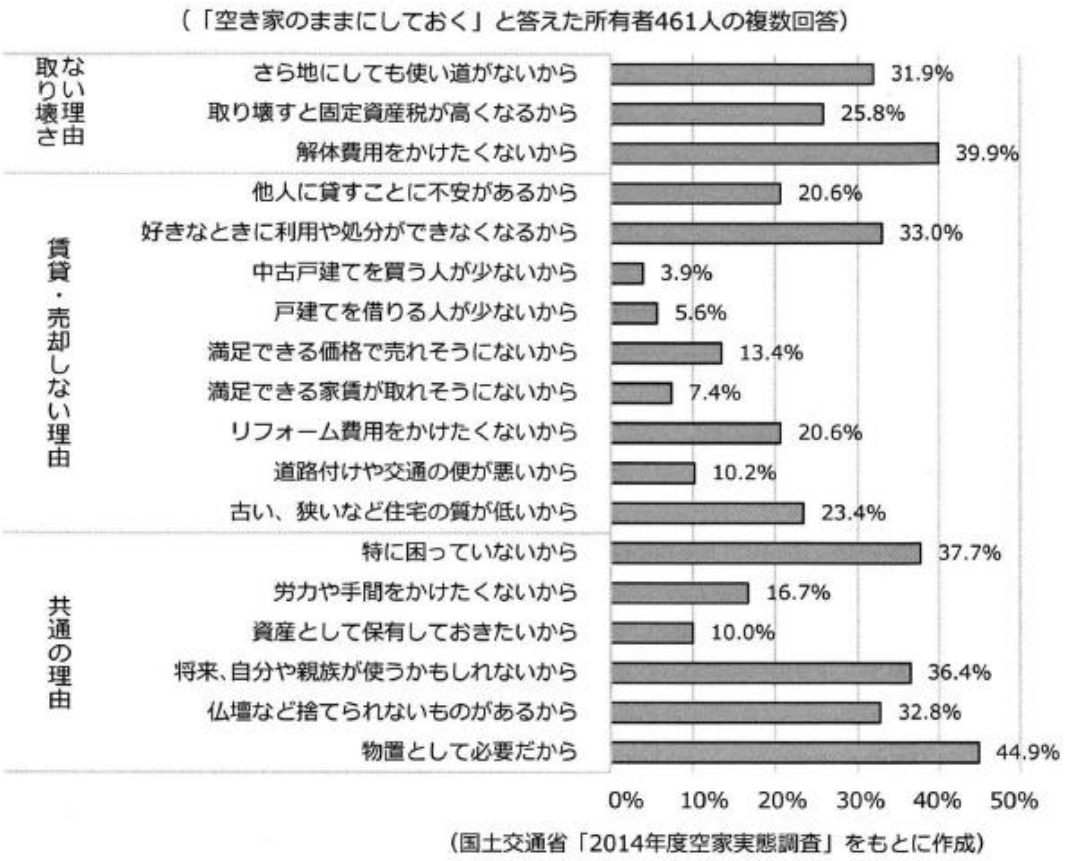

Figure 3. Survey results by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications.

by 44.9% of the respondents, followed by 'because I can't particularly be bothered to get rid of the house' (37.7%) and 'because either I or a relative might use it in the future' (36.4%). In addition, the reason 'because there are things such as Buddhist altars inside that I can't throw away' was also responded quite frequently (32.8%).

Judging from these responses, it seems a lot vacant home owners still have certain sentiments and attachment to their or their parents' former home either because of their feelings towards the home or because of it still has items such as Buddhist altars that have a religious significance to them. This is supported by several passages in the newspaper articles. According to one article: "statements such as '[the house] has a Buddhist altar' or 'now it has come to this, I can't let go' are expressed by the owners' (Matsumoto 2014). In another article, a 73 year old citizen expresses his view about the Buddhist altars staying inside empty homes saying "the only times people will come back for the house is for offerings or on new year" (Tajima 2015). In another case, a woman had difficulty letting go of the house where she grew up. With the cooperation of an NGO she transformed the *akiya* into a community home for elderly and children (Takenouchi 2015). In another case, a person told me the

story of his parents in law living in Tokyo. According to this story they were in possession of an empty house. Since the house was in good shape and located in the Tokyo area, there was a high chance that it could be sold or rented out quit easily. However, due to emotional attachment to the house, the parents in law in possession of it were in distress as to how the house could be best utilized without losing it to a new occupant or a third party.[7] It seems that an attachment to one's or one's parents' formerly home is an important factor in the choice of *akiya* homeowners to just let it be rather than selling/renting or dismantling it. This is an important starting point for further chapters of this thesis.

So far, the causes of the prominent rise of empty houses in Japan has been contributed to either a shrinking society caused by a nationwide process of ageing, or offspring unable or unwilling to take care of inherited homes. In the midst of all this, it is equally important to consider the fact that even these days new houses are still being built at an incredible pace. According to research by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism roughly 1 – 1.2 million houses have been constructed (Nakajima 2015). According to Professor Takako Ide of the Seikei University, every 1% increase in new houses will equal a 0.4% increase in empty houses (ibid.). Nozawa (2014) discussed the problems associated with new houses that are being built all over the place in rural areas. She argued that soft regulation is an important factor in causing farmlands to be used as a construction site for new houses. Even though there has been a distinction in regions that are designated to urbanize and regions that should restrain from urbanization, soft regulation will have the result of building permissions still being granted for this second category (Nozawa 2016, 70). In addition, she argued that there is yet another type of ground that is not yet classified as being either of both previously mentioned categories. This ground can be used freely as a construction site if another law (for example one related to usage of agricultural land) should enable it to do so (Ibid., 161). She argued that by using these agricultural lands without facing the issue of utilization or dismantling of *akiya*, it will promote further increase of *akiya* (Ibid., 163).

Measures and solutions

Ever since the investigation results exposed an alarming number of 8 million empty houses and an expected exponential increase, measures have been taken in the entire nation to decrease the number of *akiya*, thus to prevent houses becoming a danger or a hindrance to citizens. In January 2014, Kura city issued an ordinance to take action against its over 4.500 empty houses that are more than 50 years old. The ordinance called out to citizens to provide information about the city's *akiya*. If the owner of an empty house is known, they will be contacted about the state of their house. If the

[7] This conversation took place April 24, 2018. The person telling me this story appeared to be a Dutch man in his 30s. Due to time constraints I wasn't able to inquire further or obtain any information on his parent's in law.

situation doesn't improve the name of the owner will be announced in public in front of the *akiya* in question (Nakamura 2014). As a final measure, it has been made possible for the local government to remove the house and claim the costs to the owner. Such local ordinances have been put into force one after another recently.

Besides these local ordinances, a new '*Akiya* Special Measures'-law was enacted February 2015 and enforced nationwide on May 26. With this law, municipalities can designate an empty house as dangerous or harmful to the public. If an owner declines inspection of their house, they can be fined up to 200.000 yen (approximately 1.500 euro). A designated empty house loses its tax benefits and removed by force if the owner doesn't take any advised action beforehand (Minetoshi 2015).

To promote the efforts of *akiya* owners to sell their house, a lot of municipalities have set up an *akiya bank*. An *akiya* bank is a system that connects owners of vacant houses to interested buyers or renters. By using an *akiya bank*, municipalities aim to promote utilization of empty houses and rural migration to revitalize the region. A couple that moved from Yokohama to a small town in the Yamanashi prefecture obtained their new home by using an *akiya bank*. Although the *akiya bank* system seems in important measure for municipalities to carry out, the number of contracts that are being signed are still relatively low (Matsumoto 2014).

Because high dismantling costs are an important factor in causing people to leave their house behind, some municipalities subsidize restoration expenses, usually up to a certain amount of money. More recently, local banks are also providing loans to citizens to take care of their *akiya*. These loans have a very low interested rate and can cover the entire dismantling costs. The Fukuoka bank implemented such loans in May 2015 (*Asahi Shimbun* 2015).

In addition to measures and ordinances by the municipalities, NPOs and initiatives by public citizens also helped reduce the total number of empty houses. A project called *owari no sumai*, or final living, aimed to use an empty house in the area of Mitaka, Tokyo to facilitate elderly people in a final residence, so that they can rely on each other instead of on families. A private house of 5 LDK was rebuilt for use of elderly people. The renovation fee was about 30 million yen (roughly 218.000 euro), but most of it was covered by subsidies from the government and a loan from the Japan Finance Corporation. In the house, elderly care for each other, are provided with nursing services and are able to spend their last years there (Tomono 2014). Real Estate Agency Outlet Real Estate Co., and many more others have utilized empty houses to create a new business model. Instead of providing only an intermediate role, they buy houses directly, refurbish them and sell them (Martin 2017).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explained the problems associated with a high number of empty houses in Japan. I have also explained several important causes to this rising number of *akiya*. I have indicated the economic difficulties of dismantling a house and the tax benefits that were applicable to keeping a house on a piece of land. However, results of a survey issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and several newspaper articles indicated that economic reasons were not the only reasons given by respondents to explain their behavior of 'leaving an empty house as it is'. As an explanation for this behavior, survey respondents indicated that they still consider usage of the house by either themselves, a family member or as a storage location. In addition, the response 'I cannot particularly be bothered [to get rid of the house]' was answered quite frequently as well. Other survey questions indicated similar results. In another question people who yet again asked the reason why they would 'leave their house empty as it is', but this time around respondents were given the opportunity to provide multiple answers. In addition to answers that gave financial reasons, the previously mentioned reasons were not only responded more frequently in the survey, but included an additional reason of 'there are things like a *butsudan* inside the house that I cannot throw away'. This implies that, besides the possible financial inability of *akiya* homeowners to dismantle or sell their empty house, there seems to be an existence of an unwillingness of *akiya* homeowners to get rid of their empty house.

How, then, could this unwillingness to dismantle or sell an akiya could be explained? In other words, what would cause *akiya* homeowner to rather leave a house behind than dismantle or sell it from a social perspective? In the next chapter I will discuss the scholarly framework of housing research to choose an approach that is best suited to investigate these questions.

Chapter 2

Researching *akiya*: the conceptual framework of housing research

In the previous chapter, I've indicated that the rise of *akiya* in Japan has primarily been caused by the inability or unwillingness of managing, selling or dismantling a house that *akiya* homeowners have inherited from their parents after they have passed away or relocated to an elderly care facility. I have further indicated the existence of social reasons of *akiya* homeowners for not dismantling or selling an empty house in addition to economic reasons. I will further investigate this increase in empty houses from the perspective of the perceived existence of a social dimension to individual homeownership, rather than the economic dimension of individual homeownership. In this chapter I will propose two conflicting views on housing research, and argue which approach is best suited for my own research and why.

Researching housing issues

How should one approach and define a multi-disciplinary research subject such as housing? It is a subject that encompasses elements from sociology, government policy, economic living conditions, and case studies of particular societies draw its attention to humanities as well. According to Kemeny (1992), research on housing has been one-sided and too much preoccupied with housing policy[8], housing markets and empirical issues, ignoring broader issues. He argued that housing research instead should incorporate debates from social sciences (Kemeny 1992, 17). He thus argued for a new approach to studying housing issues. This approach would draw from existing theories, particularly those of the social sciences, which he defined as a 'sociology of residence' (ibid., 163). In Allen (2005), he maintained his stance on the non-existence of a 'housing theory'. He maintained that as a result of this lack of existing housing theory, he would argue for the application of general theory, in particular those from the social sciences (Allen 2005, 100). But can Kemeny's 'sociology of residence' be applied to investigate the rising number of *akiya*? In order to answer this question, it is important to first consider Kemeny's view on what 'housing' and 'housing research' actually entail. In other words, how does Kemeny (1992) define housing and what social issues does he want to investigate using the approach to housing research that he argued for?

[8] In this thesis, I will use the definition of housing policy by the website of the Homelesshub, i.e. the actions of government, including legislation and program delivery, which have a direct or indirect impact on housing supply and availability, housing standards and urban planning.

Housing studies is defined by Kemeny as "the study of the social, political, economic, cultural and other institutions and relationships that constitute the provision and utilisation of dwellings" (ibid., 8). Two major dimensions of housing studies in relation to social structures, he argued, are the spatial organization of housing, and the way in which households pay for it (ibid., 9). He further argued for the vocabulary through which we should understand housing research. Rather than terms such as house or household, he prefers the definition of housing as *residence*. Contrary to home, house or household, the concept of *residence* includes the wider social implications of housing (ibid., 10). Thus, housing, or *residence*, can thereby be seen as a key dimension of the social organization of modern society (ibid., 11).

Can this framework of housing studies proposed by Kemeny be applied to explaining the choice of *akiya* homeowners not to manage or habit the house? In other words, can the rise of *akiya* be explained by incorporating debates and theories from the social sciences? Before I will discuss Kemeny's view on housing in relation to my own research topic, I will discuss a view on housing research that contrasts that of Kemeny.

King (2009) explicitly argued against Kemeny's view on housing research and his starting point for this debate has not been challenged by other housing researchers since[9]. Rather than drawing from existing theories and debates of the social sciences to research housing, he argued that we "can, and should, try to theorize from out of housing and that we can therefore have theories of housing" (King 2009, 42). In other words, instead of using existing theories to conduct research on housing issues, housing research can and should be approached as its own discipline. In order to decide whether King's view on housing research can be used for my own research, it is again first important to consider how King defines housing and what he considers to be housing research. In King (2004), he defined housing as *dwelling*, which can be understood as "the privacy, intimacy and security that housing provides to an individual" (Ibid., 5-6). He further argued that the importance of housing can be understood as "the manner in which it is used." (ibid., 6). Thus, he defined his view on researching housing issues to "set about exploring what it actually means to use our housing" (ibid., ix).

In the end, which of these two views on housing research can be used to explain the rising number of *akiya* and how? It seems that Kemeny's proposed focus of research in *residence* goes well beyond the notions of house, home and household. As such it can be used to research the wider social implications of housing. King's focus of research in *dwelling* on the other hand are the household, or those who actually utilize the house. Rather than the social organization of modern society, King's view

[9] I supposed this would be published in the journal 'Housing, Theory and Society', but so far no such research has appeared since King's 2009 entry. As such I will limit my discussion on housing research to these two views.

on housing is much more concerned with the individual. Because my research focus in investigating the rise of *akiya* is the individual homeowner, rather than the social organization of Japanese society as a whole, I will use King's approach of dwelling to investigate the causes of the rising number of *akiya* from a social perspective. King has argued the importance of investigating the meaning of housing to the individual homeowner. As such, I will use King's approach to investigate the meanings that can be derived from housing in Japan in the next chapter. In the fourth chapter, I will present the findings of my interviews with individual homeowners on their view on the importance and the meaning of housing, and their experiences with *akiya*.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have proposed to conflicting views on housing research. By looking at the way they have defined housing and how they view housing research, I have chosen an approach that I will use in my own research of investigating the rise of empty houses in Japan. I have chosen King's concept of *dwelling* for my own research. In order to research *dwelling*, King argued for the importance of the meaning and utilization of housing from the perspective of the homeowner. Thus I will apply this view to my own research by investigating the meanings than can be derived from housing in Japan, and by interviewing individual homeowners on their view on housing and their experiences with *akiya*.

Chapter 3

The meaning of Housing and home in Japanese society

In the previous chapter I have discussed two conflicting views of housing research and argued which one is best suited for my own approach. I will further investigate these social causes to the rise of *akiya* in Japan according to the King's concept of *dwelling*. In this chapter, I will provide a literature discussion on the historical developments housing in Japan and it's linguistic terminology to investigate meanings and characteristics of housing in Japan. These meanings and characteristics in turn can provide explanations for the ostensibly unwillingness or inability of *akiya* homeowners to sell or dismantle their house from a social perspective. What this chapter will not do, however, is consider any discovered relationship between house and meaning in Japan as determinative to feelings of attachment, yet as one merely to be at least considered when one would observe the ever-rising number of empty houses in Japan.

When considering the meanings attached to housing and home in Japan, the first question that should be asked is whether Japan's housing system can be recognized as displaying some contextual differences compared to other countries. According to Ronald, Japan has "developed its own culture of homeownership that challenges the simplicity of the assumptions concerning the ideological function of homeownership, which illustrates the over-assertion of the Anglo-Saxon model" (Ronald 2004, 55). He continued by stating: "housing in Japan demonstrates unique characteristics as a result of the interplay of the state, the welfare system, the family, the company and traditional values and ideologies" (Ibid., 56). Ronald thus argued that homeownership in Japan contained several characteristics that could set it apart from homeownership in Anglo-Saxon societies. What, then, would these characteristics be?

From a historical point of view housing can be divided into several time periods: pre-Meiji[10] housing, pre-war and post-war housing and post-bubble housing. Although pre-Meiji housing will hardly be considered in this chapter, Meiji housing officially established the *ie* system and post-war housing marked the beginning toward the nationwide ascent into a homeownership society, abruptly halted by a post-bubble economic crisis. From a policy point of view, Hirayama (2007) elaborated on the ways in which the government has fueled post-war developments of housing in Japan. Most notably through the GHLC (Government Housing Loan Corporation of Japan) that provided middle-income households with "long-term, fixed low-interest mortgages in order to facilitate access to home

[10] Eras in Japan are named after the reign of the emperor. The Meiji emperor reigned from 1868 to 1912, followed by the Taishō era (1912-925), the Shōwa era (1926-1988) and the current Heisei era (1989-present).

ownership" (Hirayama 2007, 15-16). Hirayama (2007) furthermore discussed the manner in which the role of corporations and (the absence of) state welfare is characteristic to the way housing has developed in Japan. As such both linguistically and historically housing in Japan has various social dimensions which I will explore in this chapter.

House and home in the Japanese language

Linguistically, home and housing in Japan can be expressed through several words or phrases, whether or not policy-fueled. Whereas the English vocabulary will mostly be limited to concepts of 'house', 'home' or 'dwelling', the Japanese language offers a wide range of vocabulary to refer to one's house. This section will consider several words or concepts in the Japanese vocabulary and how they represent housing historically, culturally and politically.

The concept of *ie*, implying house, family or lineage (Sand 1998, 191), was established by the Meiji government around the end of the nineteenth century. I will present a more profound analysis of *ie* later on. *Uchi* can be read by the same character as *ie*, yet its meaning lacks the same political innuendo, and can refer to both the physical structure of the house and (contrary to common day usage of *ie*) the interiors of one's residence. In addition, another character with the same reading of *uchi* represents an important distinction between the concepts of inside and outside, or *uchi* and *soto*. These words respectively stand for one's ingroup and one's outgroup. Although the concepts have a more widespread definition than merely the insides and outsides of one's personal space, the house itself constitutes and important representation of one's ingroup, or *uchi*.

The neologism *katei* (consisting of the characters for both house and garden) became a Japanese equivalent of the English 'home', which found its way into common language usage after being confined to a small circle of Christian social reformers and their audience, in the early Meiji period (Ibid., 194). I will discuss *katei* in more depth in the next section along with *ie*. The concept of *mai hōmu*[11] can be understood as representing the post-war ideal of a detached house. It is described by Ronald as "a life-course pattern orientating around the dream of home purchase" (Ronald 2011, 6). Platz defines the principle of *mai hōmu* as "the aim to attain an 'affluent life' for the family, which included owning a spacious house equipped with the latest electrical appliances" (Platz 2011, 258). Likewise, Vogel called it "the current fad for describing the widespread commitment to family life" and argued that it's a new concept for something that has already existed for a long time (Vogel 1963, 279-280). However, according to Yamamoto we should understand *mai hōmu* as a myth created after the period of economic growth to support the establishment of a mass consumer society (Yamamoto 2014,

[11] A *wasei-eigo*, or Japan-made English word, based on the English 'my home'.

105). *Mai hōmu* is thus, similar to *katei,* based on the English 'home'. Several other words can be used to refer to the physical structure of the house. These include *kaoku*, *jūtaku*, and *hausu*.

Pre-war developments: *ie, katei*, and the Japanese family

In the previous section, I have briefly discussed the representations of *ie* and *katei* in the Japanese language. However, during the Meiji period, both of these concepts have been used to legally establish a relationship between family life, household and home. How have both of these concepts been used to define home and family life in Japan? Do these concepts still influence contemporary homeowners? In 1898 the Meiji civil code established *ie* as a legal certainty. *Ie* is not an easy concept to translate as its interpretations range from family (Koyama 1994, 48) to family line (Vogel 1963, 165) to household (Muta 1994, 54). Roles of husbands and wives were established according to its principles, and the eldest son would eventually inherit the home and become head of the household. In turn, he was expected take care of his parents when they reach old age. *Ie* thus functioned as a way of defining family life and connecting it to home, albeit in a patriarchal way. In theory, *ie* bound family to home, and made it the "moral locus of social life" (Ronald 2011, 4) and a "haven for child-rearing" (Ibid., 5). In practice, this meant a cohabitation of the eldest son, his parents, his wife and eventually their children. Second sons would leave the *ie* and start a household of their own and daughters would marry into other households through an arranged marriage. Another important characteristic of the *ie* household has been the ancestral worship through Buddhist altars (Vogel 1963, 167; Nishikawa 1995, 29). As mentioned in the first chapter, the presence of Buddhist altars was stated as a reason not to dismantle an *akiya*. In this sense, this presence of altars among other things would indicate a lingering notion of *ie* remaining in the house.

Thus we can basically understand *ie* as a Japanese family structure legally enforced by the government during the Meiji period. However, this definition still doesn't do justice to its full meaning. Scholars point out a few misleading features of the notion of *ie*. The first is the underlying presence of nationalism. Second, the misconception that *ie* is a traditional feudal relic. Third, we should understand *ie* as dynamic rather than fixed. These interpretations would shift the center of focus in *ie* from the family to the government. In essence, according to the principles of *ie*, the head of the household, usually a male, will become a symbolic representation of the emperor who is the head of the nation (Kazue, p. 55; Ueno, p. 80). Furthermore, when we dismiss the notion that *ie* is traditional, and consider that it is in fact an interpretation of the modern family enforced during the Meiji period (Ueno, p. 68), and that it's dynamic in nature, there is the possibility that *ie* is still present in contemporary Japanese society, albeit in a different form.

The principle of *ie* was formally dissolved in the New Civil Code of 1947 but scholars argue that *ie* has still persisted afterwards. Ronald argued that the *ie* norm has "perpetuated perceptions of continuity in Japanese society despite substantial shifts" (Ronald 2011, 2). In addition, he argued that "the key characteristic of *ie* is, in fact, change" (Ronald 2007, 167). This claim is supported by Ochiai (2000) who noted that "even during its legal enforcement, *ie* was continually reinvented" (Ochiai 2000, 107). According to Hideka (2007), "inter-generational aspects of the *ie* system appear to be on the wane but patriarchal relations based on gender and age appear resistant to change" (Hideka 2007, 118). Sand (1998) has been more confrontational in his assertion and claimed that "democratic reform in the years after the war failed to eradicate completely the evils of *ie*" (Sand 1998, 191). Thus, these authors have argued that *ie* is still in some way present in contemporary Japanese society.

If we can roughly understand *ie* is a government-fueled family or household structure, then we should understand *katei* as a government fueled concept of the home. *Katei* as an equivalent of the English home originated in Meiji-era magazines around 1890s (Nishikawa 1995, 21). It has been said to co-exist with the notion of *ie* during this time, yet its focus was contrary to *ie* not the lineage of the family, but the harmony of the home. However, just like *ie*, *katei* has been dynamic in nature and its post-war definition proved to be different from its original structure. Whereas *ie* did not legally survive the war, *katei* lived on, and doing so, absorbed elements of *ie* (Ibid., 31). According to Nishikawa (1995), this hybrid definition of *katei* would be one of the most difficult words to translate, yet she differentiated several characteristics. First, it is not a place where actions take place but a symbolic place. Second, it is not carried on; it lasts only one generation. Third, someone living alone cannot have a *katei*; it requires two parents and their children. Fourth, husbands and wives have different roles within the *katei* (Ibid., 31-32).

After the war families became more compact. This 'nuclear family' typically consisted of parents and two children. Although the *ie* system was legally dissolved, the *koseki*[12] system was still active and featured many shared characteristics with *ie* that are still present today. Krogness identified three pillars of the *koseki* system that are still enforced. First, under the *koseki* system households are impelled to register formally with the name and location of the first registrant. Second, members can submit and change data on their registers. Lastly, household registers have been generally accessible to the public (Krogness 2011, 67). He further argued that *koseki* has provided the citizens of Japan a sense of identification with their administrative household unit (Ibid.). Thus the registration of family, based on *ie*, survived the war as *koseki.*

[12] *Koseki* can be translated as administrative household unit.

Unlike *ie*, *katei* was very much applicable to this post-war nuclear family. Even so, this form of *katei* lasted until around 1975 when single-household apartments started to increase (Nishikawa 1995, 32). In addition, there were several other post-war developments that changed housing in Japan dramatically. The most important one's can be considered the period of high economic growth during the 1970s and the promotion of a homeownership society by the government, which will be discussed in the next section.

In this section I have argued for the existence of a pre-war government fueled concept of what a household should be and how it should be connected to the home. Although this legal definition of a household was dissolved after the war, remnants of the system still seemed to linger on in contemporary society. As such, in order to investigate the existence of notions of *ie* and its meanings to contemporary Japanese homeowners, I will present my interview research with individual Japanese families and their view on the principles of *ie* in the next chapter.

Post-war developments: the formation of a homeownership society and high economic growth

Now that *ie* has been legally dissolved after the war, what has characterized housing and home in Japan instead? I have argued in the previous section that the concept of *katei* was still active after the war. In addition the concept of *mai hōmu* came to represent the image of a happy nuclear family that lived a in a detached house. Simultaneously, Japan experienced a period of high economic growth after the war. As such governmental policies encouraged social mobility through homeownership as a new middleclass ideal. I will discuss the social status and meanings that housing started to represent in this section. .

After the war governmental policies encouraged the growth of owner-occupied houses. In effect, becoming the owner of a detached house became an aspiration among many citizens. The road towards becoming a homeowner could thus be seen as a means of achieving a goal. Hirayama (2007) called this the 'homeownership ladder', climbed by young people during the period of economic growth who eventually desire to reach its top; becoming the owner of a detached house. He stated:

Home ownership was linked to a socially constructed image – a combination of middle or high-level income, stable employment and credibility, and property asset ownership. Owning a house meant that the owner belonged to the core of society and owning a niwatsuki ikkodate jutaku[13] *symbolized that the owner had climbed up the ladder and reached the top* (Hirayama 2007, 21).

In this sense, homeownership seemingly served another purpose its materialistic value. It turned the house into a symbol for an affluent life and in turn the homeowners into the ones living it.

[13] A detached house with a garden attached to it.

Ronald (2008) also mentioned this symbolic nature of a house and stated that "another aspect of significance for Japanese homeowners is symbolic, or identity, consumption" (Ronald 2008, 244). He elaborated on this consumption, by referring to Hirayama's claims, as something that could be associated to 'mainstream middleclass' identities (Ibid.). How then, should we understand this middleclass identity? According to Gordon (2009) this middleclass identity can be understood as a new way of life as a result of a period of high economic growth after the war (Gordon 2009, p. 243). Vogel (1963) further added that the lifestyle of the salaryman, or *sararīman*[14] has perhaps been the most important characteristic of the new middleclass that emanated after the war (Vogel 1963, 5).

Ozaki (1998) issued a survey among residents in the Kōhoku district in Yokohama to investigate perceptions of class and status in connection to housing. Her survey results indicated that the Japanese did not necessarily consider a house as a representation of status, when comparing it to survey results conducted in Britain. This could according to her be contributed to the general shared sentiment among the Japanese citizens of belonging to a homogeneous middle class society (Ozaki 1998, 74). Yet she did claim that her survey results pointed out an "acute awareness about differences in occupational status by looking at houses" (Ibid, 75). Although Ozaki's survey could be an interesting addition to the available fieldwork in perceptions of housing in Japan, her results seemed to be somewhat questionable as she admits herself that the notions of *tatemae* and *honne*[15] could distort them, and that "extensive interviews seem necessary in order to break people's refusal to acknowledge social differences" (Ibid, 78).

In this sense, homeownership has come to represent an ideal of social mobility towards a new middleclass and the social status that could be derived from it. I will further explore this meaning that can be derived from housing when I discuss my interviews with Japanese homeowners in the next chapter.

During this time of homeownership and middleclass identity encouraged by governmental policies, Japan experienced a period of high economic growth. Housing not only became affordable through governmental loans and policies, but it also became a means of accumulating financial wealth as houses became valuable assets. Furthermore, as a result of the reported absence of state welfare[16] in Japan, families have been argued to accumulate wealth and assets through their own means in order to provide for the needs of themselves and their family members. As such various scholars have argued

[14] The term salaryman, or its *wasei-eigo* equivalent *sararīman*, usually refers to the employment-based lifestyle of a new type of white-collar worker that most notably grew in number after the war.
[15] Roughly speaking, the distinction between *tatemae* and *honne* can be understood as a distinction between one's presented feelings outward and one's real feelings inward.
[16] I will discuss the relationship between housing and welfare in Japan more specifically in a later section.

for the value of a house as a desirable economic asset in Japan to provide relatives or offspring with affordable housing and to accumulate capital. In this section, I will discuss meaning that can be derived from housing as a means of accumulating family capital.

A house is an expensive object and once the mortgage has been paid off it is entirely in the possession of the owner. Once the home is officially acquired, it can be passed onto future generations as well. Therefore, one could argue a house to be a valuable object to own. Post-war Japan met with an incredible growth in homeownership and a nationwide desire among the post-war generation to become the owner of a house, as discussed in the previous section. However, the bubble crisis that followed the period of high economic growth wounded the real estate market to such a degree, that it is still struggling to recover. Accompanied by the changing family structures and an increase in single-person households, homeownership demand seemed to be on decline. Houses have come into the possession of younger generations after parents pass away or relocate. As we've seen, the result has been a high number of empty and abandoned houses.

So, to what extent are houses still economically a desired asset to own? According to Hirayama (2011), "owning a house was a primary mechanism of asset accumulation before the bubble" (Hirayama, 2011, 160). However, "after the bubble burst home ownership was no longer reliable in terms of the accumulation of property assets and instead a new era in which property ownership involves higher risks began" (Ibid., 161). Hirayama argued that young people now have more difficulties accessing home ownership. This can provide a possible explanation for the choice of leaving a house in one's possession as a possible asset for the future. This can, however, also influence the choice of deciding to take care of the inherited house as soon as possible, as its maintaining costs and declining value will only become a burden resulting in negative equity.

An important factor contributing to the provision of housing is the Japanese welfare system, or perhaps better phrased as the ostensibly lack thereof. Instead of providing accessible public rental housing, the government encouraged the provision of housing to be done by both the family and the corporation[17]. With regard to this, Hirayama (2011) explained: "reciprocal family relations were particularly positioned as pivotal pillars of the welfare system. Facilitating the individual ownership of residential properties was assumed to be effective in providing housing and, more importantly to the state, serving as a substitute for having to expand public welfare" (Hirayama 2011, 154). Izuhara (2011) emphasized the importance of accumulating assets in the form of housing equity as a result of improved access to healthcare by elderly citizens. She argued that "those that have higher income and accumulated assets can retain them and their possible financial benefits while still having access to

[17] See also Iwao Sato's chapter about welfare and corporate housing in Hirayama (2011).

long-term care" (Izuhara 2011, 103). Izuhara (2000) further argued that "home ownership plays an important role in the accumulation of family wealth over generations" (Izuhara 2000, 85-86) and "that to older people who are reluctant to move to supportive housing or trade down their property due to their attachment to such 'family residence', a reverse mortgage scheme may provide a compromise" (Ibid.). Thus, according to Izuhara and Hirayama, there seems to be an important financial meaning to housing as means of providing wealth and housing to family members. According to the fieldwork conducted by Ronald (2008), interviewees[18] expressed their joy in possessing a house because it guarantees lifelong shelter and it provides an economic asset (Ronald 2008, 242). However, they seemed to consider the land the house was built on as having more value. (Ibid., 241).

Thus, could their still be a meaning derived from housing through its possible financial benefits? In the first chapter, respondents of the survey indicated their intent of possible future usage by themselves or relatives, or utilizing the house as a storage location. Several scholars on housing and welfare in Japan have argued for the absence of state welfare, especially during the period of high economic growth, the period in which becoming a homeowner was considered as something desirable. I will present the findings of the discussion with my interviewees of this perceived of housing as a financial asset for future use or for future family use.

Conclusion

So, in the end, what meanings might we derive from housing in Japan? In this chapter I have argued for the existence of several characteristics to housing in Japan by analyzing literature on its linguistic and historical developments. These characteristics have established three dimensions of meaning to housing in Japan, that can in turn constitute the social reasons of *akiya* homeowners not to dismantle or sell their house. These are the presence of notions of the system of *ie* that was enforced during the Meiji period, the homeownership ideal stimulated by the government during the period of high economic growth, and the financial value of a house to accumulate family assets in the absence of state welfare.

Linguistically, housing in Japan has been expressed through various phrases that represented political efforts to attach meaning and importance to the relationship between home and family. These are most notably the concepts of *ie*, *katei* and *mai hōmu*. Both *ie* and *katei* have been enforced during the Meiji period and represented values and ideals of the Japanese family, which were during that time characterized by intergenerational cohabitation and a division of labor among other things.

[18] Interviewees were primarily aged around 60 years old, with some exceptions in their 30s.

Historically, *ie* was legally abolished after the war, yet scholars have argued for its dynamic character and its lingering presence in contemporary society. Thus, notions of *ie* still seemed to influence home and family life in Japan to a certain extent. As such meaning could still be derived from housing due the roles and responsibilities housing could fulfill to family members. After the war, governmental efforts and policies urged homeowners to aspire for the ideals of becoming a homeowner and to become part of the new middleclass. This created a social status that could be derived from becoming a homeowner due to both its symbolism of a middleclass lifestyle as well as its achievement of the efforts required to climb what Hirayama called the 'homeownership ladder'. Simultaneously, the period of economic growth and the absence of state welfare constituted financial value that could be derived from housing and homeownership. Due to the reportedly absence of welfare, the family has been considered the most important provider of wealth and healthcare to family members. During the period of high economic growth housing not only became affordable, but also an important means of accumulating family wealth. These three dimensions of meaning to housing can provide explanations for the causes of the increase of *akiya* from a social perspective. I have conducted interviews with homeowners in Japan to investigate their view on these meanings and characteristics of housing that I have explored in this chapter. I will discuss these results of these interviews in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Interview research

In the first chapter, I have indicated the existence of social causes to the rise of *akiya*. How, then might these social causes be explained? I have argued for the approach I will take to provide these explanations and to further investigate this social dimension of homeownership in Japan in the second chapter. In line with this approach, I have investigated the meanings that can be derived from housing in Japan through historical and linguistic developments of housing in Japan in the third chapter. A literature discussion on these developments provided three characteristics of housing in Japan of which meaning can be derived to housing by individual homeowners. These characteristics may provide explanations for the choice of *akiya* homeowners not to sell or dismantle their house. I have conducted interviews with homeowners in Japan about these characteristics and their personal experiences with *akiya*. I will present the results of these interviews in this chapter.

I have conducted five interviews in total. The first interview I conducted was with a university student in his 20s living in Nagoya. The interview was conducted on April 18 2018 17.00 CEST. The interview was conducted in Japanese. The second interview was with a women of middle age living in Hiroshima with her husband and children. They are currently renting a house that previously was an *akiya*. The interview was conducted on April 21 2018 9.00 CEST. The interview was also conducted in Japanese. The third interview I conducted was with a woman in her forties living in Osaka with her husband. Her parental home has been an *akiya* for some time but it has a tenant now. The interview was conducted on May 7 2018 10.00 CEST. The interview was conducted in English. The fourth interview I conducted was with the mother of the third interviewee. She used to possess the previously mentioned former *akiya*. The interview was conducted on May 13 2018 10.00 CEST. The interview was conducted in English and the third interviewee acted as an interpreter. The fifth interview was with a male civil servant worker. Because of his job, he has encountered many *akiya*. I have conducted the interview on May 28 2018 12.00 CEST. The interview was conducted in Japanese. For ethical and privacy reasons, I will refer to the interviewees as interviewee one-five.

Interview results

King (2004) argued that the concept of *dwelling* is very much concerned with the meaning of housing to the individual and how the individual utilizes the house. As such I have implemented this approach in my interviews. The first question I asked was how the interviewees recalled their childhood home. Interviewee one stated:

> Well, let's see, I have a lot of memories to it. It was not really a house in the traditional sense, but a mansion apartment. I lived there for a very long time. I often went to see my grandmother [who lives nearby]. My childhood home was a place for a happy family get-together[19]. I haven't really thought about it in that way, but now that I do, it was, after all, my own dwelling. Like a place of my own.

He added that his parents still inhabit this house. He made several other references to his grandmother and how he often visited her. He further mentioned his grandmother's home now being an important storage location for things such as food and electric appliances. According to the survey results in the first chapter, many respondents indicated the desire to use empty houses as a storage location.

Interviewee two explained that until she was in her twenties, she lived with her family in a rental house. After that she moved with her parents to a house of their own. She lived there together with her parents on the ground floor, and the spouse and children of her brother on the second floor. After her marriage she left the house to go live with her husband. They acquired their current home on which she added:

> After we came here, our children were born, we raised our children here, we bought a dog; it is a house full of memories. I really love it.

When I asked what housing meant to her personally, she described a house as "a place where you create memories with your family". Interviewee three has changed residence often both during her childhood and during her adult life. When she eventually moved to a rental house in Osaka, she and her husband decided to buy it. When I asked her what housing meant to her personally, she explained that due to economic hardships in the past, housing primarily has a functional value to her. The fifth interviewee grew up in a house his parents built in the 1960s. Because he is the oldest son, his parents preferred him to keep living there. However, since his ex-wife did not want to move in with her parents in law, they moved to a new house, where he currently still resides.

The next questions I asked inquired on how their house is connected to their family structure. The first interviewee explained that his parents acquired their own home together and lived there instead of in the house of his grandparents. The second interviewee explained that even though they are currently renting a house, because her husband is the eldest son in his family, he will inherit his parents' home when they pass away. She added that they might live there if that happens, otherwise it would most likely become an *akiya*. The fourth interviewee, the mother of the third interviewee, explained that the house of her parents in law was built in Nagano around 1931 and that their ancestors, presumably the first inhabitants, lived in the mountainous area of Nagano before that. In

[19] Translator note: *ikka danran*.

addition to the family of her parents in law, the house has also been inhabited by a male servant and the younger sister of her father in law and her children. The younger sister of her grandfather had just divorced after the war and had nowhere to go, so she lived in the house of her relatives. Nishikawa (1995) also described the practice of people who lost their home as a result of the war who once again relied on the *ie* system for temporary residence (Nishikawa 1995, 29). During our conversation, the fourth interviewee often referred to the house as the [surname of the family]-house. When I asked her about the presence of an altar for ancestors, her daughter explained:

> We often went to our ancestors tomb during *Obon*[20] and other times. There we cleaned the tomb, gave it water and flowers and offered incense. And during New Year, our family gathered together, where we chatted and had a nice time. Children received sweets and we sang songs. There is also a relatively big *Butsudan* in the house, where we put an *ihai*[21]. Sometimes we lighted a candle or incense. They also had *kamidana*[22], in the *chanoma*[23] My grandfather changed the water almost every day. Regarding the *Butsudan*, sometimes people in the neighborhood or strangers visited the house and offered food or small gifts. My grandmother offered it to the Butsudan, and sometimes and molded. Each season, new agricultural products were harvested, we call it *hatsumono*[24], that were also offered to the *Butsudan*. And my grandparents put a picture on the wall near the *Butsudan*. Later in life, my grandparents put the *ihai* in a warehouse.

The fifth interviewee explained how inheritance procedures and family structure influenced housing decisions in his family:

> If my mother died, I will inherit the house where my mother lives now. If I later died, according to the provisions of the Civil Code both my father 's house and my house will be inherited by my mother' s brother. However, my mother's sister are elderly (the eldest daughter is 94 years old, the youngest sister is 76 years old) so they probably will not outlive me. In theory, these two houses would be inherited and have shared ownership by my mother's sisters (five people). […] My father was not his family's eldest son. So when he married my mother, they bought land and built a house there. It was in the 1960s. There are a lot of people who built a house like my father during this era. Since then the traditional values still lived on, my father and mother believed that I would succeed the house when I married. However, it has become common for people not to live in their parents' house anymore after marriage. Even when I consulted with my parents about building a new house somewhere, they did not oppose it, but I could see it in the complexion of their faces that they were troubled by it.

[20] During the Obon Festival family members honor their ancestors.
[21] A spirit tablet used for deities and ancestors.
[22] A household shrine for Shintō deities.
[23] A Japanese-style living room.
[24] The first harvest of the season.

In other words, according to the principles of *ie*, the eldest son would become head of the household. However, since the father of interviewee five was not the eldest son, he started a new household with his wife. He further explained that a lot of people built new houses in the 1960s just like his parents did. In the previous chapter, I have explained how the period of high economic growth after the war indeed caused a rise in the number of homeowners in Japan. In addition, interviewee three described how she lived in various houses during her past. When her mother acquired the house that formerly belonged to her parents in law, she did not want to sell or dismantle the house. According to interviewee three:

> My mother and my sister now live in social housing. But my mother wants to be homeowner, so the way I see it she wants to stick to the house. She wants to continue being a homeowner. That why registered the house to an *akiya* bank.

This can be understood as the desire of interviewee four to remain a homeowner after having lived in a reasonable number of rental houses. In this sense, she climbed the homeownership ladder to the top and finally became a the owner of a house. However, when I asked interviewee four the same question, her daughter explained:

> My mother never lived in the *akiya* herself. My mother, my sister and I often visited it during summer or winter holiday etc. But my mother feels that it is the house her husband grew up and lived together with my grandparents. Second, my mother realized that her parents in law have been there for a long time, so my mother has a sense of responsibility to keep or maintain the former *akiya*. Because of these reasons my mother wanted to keep and inherit the ex-*akiya*.

The interviewees made no other comments on any social status that could be derived from homeownership. In addition they did not discuss any financial merits to homeownership. On the contrary, when I asked the third interviewee what meaning housing has to her, she explicitly stated:

> Honestly speaking, I do not put a high value on housing asset. To me buying a house does not necessarily mean asset accumulation.

The fifth interviewee expressed similar doubts of the financial value of a house because of the costs and risks associated with buying a house. He explained that younger generations now have much more difficulties in buying houses due to a declining economy.

The remaining questions of the interview dealt with *akiya* specifically. The first interviewee related a story of a friend from high school whose neighbor's house became uninhabited. According to his friend, the *akiya* homeowners gave the rights of the house to the neighbors. This practice is also mentioned by Nozawa (2016). She described how neighboring houses can profit from *akiya* by turning the vacant lot into their extended garden or parking space (Nozawa, 2016, 104).

The house of the second interviewee turned out to be vacant before she and her family moved in. According to her explanation:

> This house is possessed by a landlord of whom we rent it and inhabit it. The landlord has a lot of other houses which are actually *akiya*, so he's looking for people to live in them. The previous inhabitants had moved. We heard that the house was empty so we rented it.

We continued our conversation on the topic of *akiya*. Her explanations of its rising number had many similarities with the contents of the *Asahi Shinbun* newspaper articles, which I described in the first chapter. However she added one more explanation of the rise of *akiya*, which didn't seem to be mentioned in either the newspaper articles or the books and articles about the subject: the role of dementia. She explained:

> It is very expensive to break down the house. It also costs money to repair the house. Plus, if you rent it to others you have to maintain it. You have those reasons, but the biggest problem is when the elderly start losing their memories. When the elderly begin to suffer from this illness, they can't do anything about the house until they pass away. When they are still mentally strong they can ask help from their children, but when they are suffering from this illness they cannot do that anymore. If that happens, they cannot break down the house, they cannot rent it to others, it will remain as it is until they pass away.

The fifth interviewee had encountered many *akiya* because of his job. He explained that an incomplete inheritance procedure is an important cause to the rise of empty houses. He believed that there is a difference in Japanese society between inheritance according to the law and inheritance according to traditional Japanese values. He explained:

> According to the traditional values that continued since the days when the majority of Japanese were farmers, *honke* can generally be understood as the duty of the eldest son to protect the parents' house, grave and *Butsudan*. Although this concept of home does not match very well with modern society, it still affects the Japanese way of thinking and complicates the problem. For example, let's consider my inheritance. Although it is purely hypothetical, if I die earlier due to an accident or something like that, I have no children so my mother will become a statutory heir under the provisions of the Civil Code. If my mother dies afterwards, my mother's sister will be the statutory heir. However, according to the *honke* of my parental home, my father 's older brother will be the next successor, and his eldest daughter will inherit it.

In other words, because of traditional values of the family structure, families have a different perception of the inheritance procedure than how it is stipulated in the law. This may bring about uncertainty about the inheritance rights after homeowners pass away which in turn can result in the lack of management and further handling of the *akiya*.

Conclusion

I have interviewed five homeowners in Japan to investigate the extent to which meanings to housing that I discussed in the previous chapter applied to them. Furthermore, I have asked them about their experiences with *akiya*, how they feel towards the houses they have lived in, and what meaning they derive from housing in general. Interviewee two was renting a house with her family that had been an *akiya* before they were living in it. However, because they would inherit the house of her parents in law since her husband was the first son in his family, there was the possibility that they would relocate to the house of her parents in law. The fourth interviewee, the mother of the third interviewee, used to possess an *akiya*, which is now occupied by a tenant. Even though the third interviewee indicated that the reason her mother did not want to sell or dismantle the house, was because she placed value on being a homeowner, her mother explained that she did not want to sell it because she felt responsible to the family of her parents in law. The fifth interviewee, who dealt with many cases of *akiya* in his job as civil servant, further explained why he thought why family members would 'leave an empty house as it is'. According to his explanations, there is a difference in Japan between how the inheritance procedure is perceived according to traditional values, and how it is stipulated in the law. This difference may give rise to uncertainty about the responsibilities towards the house of family members. As a result, costs and management associated with the *akiya* can be neglected and the house will be left uninhabited and unmanaged.

Concluding remarks

In the end, how can this rapid rise in empty houses be explained from the perspective of the social dimension of homeownership? Because of a rapidly ageing society, an increasing amount of Japanese elderly citizens are at risk of relocating to an elderly care facility and they have an increased risk of death due to their age. When either happens, their house will be passed unto future generations. However, because these new owners are not always able to inhabit the use themselves and are not able to maintain it, the house is at risk of becoming an empty an unmanaged house. As such several millions of these houses are scattered across the nation. Thus, how might we explain this inability or unwillingness of *akiya* homeowners to dismantle or sell their house, or dispose of it in a different way, from a social perspective?

In the first chapter, I have described the phenomenon of *akiya*. Because the houses are at higher risk of catching fire, collapsing and intrusion by unwanted guests, they are designated as a problem to society. Furthermore, because they are not maintained properly, they are at risk of becoming a burden to the neighborhood. Governmental policies have been enforced that aim to decrease the amount of *akiya*. These measures include the removal of tax benefits and a law forcing an *akiya* homeowner to dismantle their home once it is designated as a problematic *akiya*. Since many of these measures alleviate economic costs, this would indicate that the causes of the increase of *akiya* are primarily economic. However, I have also demonstrated the existence of social causes of the rise of *akiya* in addition to economic causes. Survey results by the Ministry of Internal Communications listed the presence of Buddhist family altars, the possibility of future usage and storage usage among other reasons in addition to the economic reasons as explanations for homeowners not to dismantle or sell their house. Furthermore, an analysis of the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper articles on the subject of *akiya* provided examples in which *akiya* homeowners refrained from selling or dismantling the house as a result of attachment to it. Thus how can this social dimension to the rise of *akiya* be explained?

In the second chapter, I have discussed conflicting views on housing research. Whereas Kemeny (1992) argued that housing research has been too preoccupied with housing policy and ignored broader debates and theories of particularly the social sciences, King (2009) argued that housing research has been shown to be absent of *dwelling*. Since this concept of *dwellings* is much more concerned with the meaning of homeownership to the individual, I have chosen to use it to investigate the rise of *akiya* from a social perspective.

As such, I have investigated the meanings of housing in through historical developments and linguistic expressions in the third chapter. An analysis of the available literature on housing and home in Japan lead me to three important characterizations of housing in Japan of which *akiya* individual homeowners can derive meaning from housing. These are the lingering presence of *ie* ideals of family structure, the house as a middleclass homeownership ideal and the economic value of a house to provide for family members in the absence of state welfare.

These three dimensions of meaning to housing that I have discussed in the third chapter, can provide explanations for the choice of *akiya* homeowners not to sell or dismantle their house. As such I have interviewed homeowners to investigate the extent to which their view on housing and *akiya* corresponded with my findings in the third chapter. Although I could only interview five homeowners, they all had either direct or indirect experiences with *akiya*. Furthermore most of them expressed the existence of values associated with *ie*, such as inheritance procedures in which the eldest son will become the new head of the household and the presence of *Butsudan* in the house to honor ancestors. One interviewee used to possess an *akiya*, which she refused to sell because of her responsibilities towards her parents in law, who were the previous homeowners. Another interviewee was currently living in a former *akiya* with her family. However, since her husband was the eldest son in his family, they would be the future inheritors of the house of her parents in law. She indicated that they would most likely live there if that happened, since the house would otherwise be at risk of becoming an *akiya*. Another interviewee explained that a difference between traditional values that dealt with inheritance and how it is described in the law complicate inheritance procedures and cause a reasonable number of *akiya* to be left unmanaged as a result. Further research on the effects of family structure on housing in contemporary Japanese society would provide a through-provoking starting point to further investigate the social causes of a rising number of empty houses in Japan.

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