

# FINAL REPORT/ ABSCHLUSSBERICHT

Project title:

## **Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan/ Stadt-Land-Migration und ländliche Revitalisierung in Japan**

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## 1 Summary/ Zusammenfassung

To counter population decline and labor shortages in rural Japan, central and local governments have launched programs aimed at revitalizing rural areas by attracting new residents to live and work in the countryside. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the perception of rural life and led to an increase in urban-rural migration, the total number of migrants remains small and is unevenly distributed across Japan. Peripheral areas receive fewer newcomers than regions close to cities. This research project compared urban-rural migration in four municipalities in Kyūshū, Japan's southernmost main island, to find out how urban-rural migration affects rural revitalization. Although all municipalities offer a wide range of quite similar financial incentives and other support programs aimed at encouraging migration, in none of them were numbers of in-migrants high enough to reverse the overall demographic decline. By combining ethnographic research with policy analysis, the research team found that the way central and local governments conceptualize urban-rural migration influences migrants' self-perceptions and determines their eligibility for support. These classifications are often based on simplistic criteria, such as a migrant's place of origin, and overlook the complexity of individual migration experiences. We challenge these traditional categories that classify migrants simply according to their place of origin or view migration as settlement by suggesting a more nuanced understanding of urban-rural migration that includes a broader concept of migration embracing more flexible and temporary mobilities. This perspective acknowledges the fluidity of contemporary migration patterns as in each of the four communities, both short-term and long-term urban-rural migrants have made significant contributions. They have started their own businesses, enhancing the appeal of their new hometowns for both locals and tourists, while also generating employment. Beyond their economic impact, these migrants are influencing local culture by introducing new and often mobile lifestyles and new notions of community. Although these changes may be small in quantitative terms, they are notable in terms of the qualitative transformation they bring to rural areas.

Um dem Bevölkerungsrückgang und dem Arbeitskräftemangel in den ländlichen Gebieten Japans entgegenzuwirken, haben sowohl die japanische Regierung als auch die Gemeinden Programme aufgelegt, die darauf abzielen, ländliche Gebiete wiederzubeleben, indem sie neue Einwohner zum Leben und Arbeiten auf dem Lande anwerben. Obwohl die COVID-19-Pandemie die Wahrnehmung des Landlebens positiv veränderte und zu einem Anstieg der Stadt-Land-Migration geführt hat, bleibt die Gesamtzahl der Migranten gering und ist ungleichmäßig verteilt. Insbesondere Kommunen, die weit von urbanen Zentren entfernt liegen, verzeichnen weniger Zuzüge als stadtnahe Regionen. In diesem Forschungsprojekt wurde

die Stadt-Land-Migration in vier Gemeinden in Kyūshū, Japans südlichster Hauptinsel, vergleichend untersucht, um herauszufinden, wie diese die ländliche Revitalisierung beeinflusst. In keiner der vier untersuchten Gemeinden war die Zuwanderung hoch genug, um den Bevölkerungsrückgang umzukehren. Alle Gemeinden bieten ein recht ähnliches Spektrum an finanziellen Anreizen und anderen Unterstützungsprogrammen, die auf die Förderung der Migration abzielen. Mithilfe einer Kombination aus ethnografischer Forschung und Policy-Analyse, fand das Forschungsteam heraus, dass die Art und Weise, wie Regierung und Gemeinden Stadt-Land-Migration konzeptualisieren, die Selbstwahrnehmung von Migrant\*innen beeinflusst und ihren Anspruch auf finanzielle und andere Unterstützung definiert. Diese Klassifizierungen stützen sich häufig auf vereinfachende Kriterien, wie z. B. den Herkunftsort von Migrant\*innen und werden der Komplexität individueller Migrationserfahrungen nicht gerecht. Wir schlagen daher ein differenzierteres Verständnis von Stadt-Land-Migration vor, welches traditionelle Kategorien und Dichotomien überwindet. Stattdessen plädieren wir für ein Migrationskonzept, das flexiblere und kurzfristige Mobilitätsformen einschließt und die Fluidität gegenwärtiger Migrationsmuster anerkennt. In jeder Gemeinde haben Stadt-Land-Migrant\*innen mit unterschiedlicher Aufenthaltsdauer einen Beitrag zur Revitalisierung geleistet. Viele haben eigene Unternehmen gegründet und damit die Attraktivität ihrer neuen Heimatstädte sowohl für Einheimische als auch für Touristen erhöht und gleichzeitig Arbeitsplätze geschaffen. Neben ihrem wirtschaftlichen Einfluss, bereichern diese Migrant\*innen auch die lokale Kultur, indem sie neue und oft mobilere Lebensstile und alternative Formen von Gemeinschaft praktizieren. Auch wenn diese Veränderungen in quantitativer Hinsicht gering sein mögen, so sind sie im Hinblick auf den qualitativen Wandel, den sie im ländlichen Raum bewirken, doch bemerkenswert.

## 2 Results

Rural Japan is facing severe population decline and labor shortage that hits farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises in rural areas particularly hard (Oishi 2021: 2264). Therefore, Japanese central and local governments are trying to revitalize rural areas through programs aimed at attracting new residents to live and work in the countryside. After the 2013 Masuda report, which predicted the disappearance of 50% of all Japan's rural communities by 2040, the central government passed the Law for Overcoming Population Decline and Revitalizing the Local Economy. The corresponding Five-Year Comprehensive Strategy (Machi, hito, shigoto sōsei sōgō senryaku) published in 2014 and 2019 respectively, aimed at counteracting out-migration from rural to urban areas. But most measures to halt population decline failed.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, a reassessment of rural life has taken place and urban-rural migration has increased in many countries of the Global North (González-Leonardo, Rowe and Fresolone-Caparròs 2022; Halfacree 2024; Rowe, González-Leonardo and Champion 2023). In Japan, the surge in urban-rural migration during the COVID-19 pandemic has received much media attention. People from Japan's urban centers moved to smaller towns in rural Japan due to fear of infection or because teleworking offered the opportunity to work anywhere. Some companies even moved their headquarters to regions outside of Tokyo (Reiher 2022). In 2023, the Japanese government increased financial incentives for families to leave Tokyo and move to the countryside (McCurry 2023).

## 2.1 Initial questions and project objectives

Against this backdrop, this project set out in 2020 to understand how urban-rural migration impacts on rural revitalization in Japan. With a focus on local practices, mobilities and policies, the project analyzed how urban-rural migration challenges local social structures, power inequalities between centers and their peripheries and central-local relations in Japan and shed light on how mobilities contribute to reconfigurations of rural spaces in Japan. In order to answer these questions and to account for regional and local differences, we compared how municipalities of similar size in different prefectures in Kyūshū, Japan's most southern main island, appropriate these programs and studied their impact on in-migration, migrants' experiences and revitalization practices. For comparison, we chose four municipalities in Fukuoka, Nagasaki, Ōita and Saga prefectures which all developed their own policies and support systems for regional revitalization and the promotion of in-migration.

We chose Kyūshū, because distance to Tōkyō has been identified as an obstacle to successfully attracting in-migrants and other resources (Kitano 2009). In addition to its distance from Tokyo, Kyūshū is also distinct in that its birth rate is higher than in other regions, but the island struggles more with the out-migration of young people. In 2016, 51 percent of all municipalities in Kyūshū were classified as towns at risk of disappearing (*shōmetsu kanōsei toshi*). Prefectures and municipalities in Kyūshū are trying to further increase the birth rate through support measures for marriage, childbirth and child rearing and to create jobs to promote in-migration. The main goal is to attract well-educated people to start their own businesses and create jobs (Koyanagi 2016: 508-10).

## 2.2 Project data and data handling

All team members conducted field research, both online and onsite. The COVID-19 pandemic had a strong impact on our methodology and objectives. Before the travel ban on Japan was lifted in 2022, we conducted online interviews and digital ethnography. In 2022 and 2023,

the PI and PhD student Cecilia Luzi conducted ethnographic research in two municipalities each. Observations were documented through fieldnotes, photographs, audio and video recordings. The PI and PhD student Ngo Tu Thanh analyzed the central government's Comprehensive Strategy and its prefectural and local adaptations. Together, the project team has conducted 200 semi-structured interviews with internal and transnational migrants, long-term local residents, central and local government officials, mayors, policy advisors, members of parliament, NPOs and experts involved in rural revitalization policies. This combination of different methods and data made it possible to bring together micro and macro perspectives and obtain diverse and valid data.

To further ensure the quality of our research, we publish(ed) our results in peer reviewed journals (see below). Throughout the research process, we followed good research practice and ethics guidelines as established by the DFG (2019). We obtained permission from each municipality's local government to conduct fieldwork and written consent from all research participants regarding the production, storage and publication of data and ensured their anonymity. Data made during the project were shared among project members only via the file hosting service at FUB (FU Box). For the analysis of interviews and fieldnotes, we used the software MAXQDA. After the end of the project, the PI has access to all data and will continue analysis and publication in consultation with the (former) PhD students. The PI was responsible for ensuring that all project data were handled with care by all project members.

The policy documents we have analyzed are available online. The ethnographic data and interview data are sensitive and will not be shared with other researchers for reuse. However, we published preliminary results and photographs on our project blog and reflected on methods and the handling of different types of sources. We have received permission for publishing information and pictures online from all individuals involved. In order to sustain the blog contributions and to store blog posts and photographs, we collaborate with CrossAsia's Open Access Repository ([https://repository.crossasia.org/receive/crossasia\\_mods\\_00000378](https://repository.crossasia.org/receive/crossasia_mods_00000378))

### **2.3 Urban-rural migration, population decline and support schemes**

The number of people moving from cities to rural areas in Japan is small. In the municipalities we studied, between 10 and 100 newcomers arrive per year. Despite this, the population in all four areas continues to decline at different rates. While some areas of Japan saw increased urban-to-rural migration during COVID-19, this was not the case in our field sites due to their remoteness. The actual number of people moving to Fukuoka, Nagasaki and Ōita prefectures grew slightly, but urban-rural migration to Saga prefecture during the pandemic has not increased at all. While most urban-rural migrants are aged between 30 and 50, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of migrants in their twenties has slightly in-

creased in all four prefectures (Reiher 2022). Telework migrants emerged during the pandemic, but these areas saw few because they lacked the infrastructure for remote work.

Although internal migration has not been able to compensate for the population decline in any of the municipalities studied, municipalities and prefectures compete with each other for new residents. All four prefectures and municipalities surveyed offer a similar mix of on-site and online information to attract migrants. Potential new residents can stay in trial houses for a short period of time to get to know life in the countryside and find an apartment via a database of available properties (*akiya bank*). After relocation, migrants receive financial support of JPY 600,000 for an individual and JPY 1,000,000 for a family. In addition, each municipality offers individual support measures, such as rent discounts for families with children (Reiher 2022). In the four municipalities, different stakeholders are responsible for advising and supporting potential new residents. These include the local government, a non-profit organization, an individual former newcomer and an association that works closely with the local government.

The target group differs slightly across the four prefectures and municipalities in terms of age groups and gender. But all migrants are expected to integrate, take on community tasks, create jobs, or help maintain schools by starting families. This reflects the responsibility placed on migrants for revitalizing rural areas expressed in the neoliberal logic of personal responsibility for state duties (Reiher 2022). While in one town, migrants relocate because of the support system (Reiher 2020), in the other three towns, the majority of migrants often did not even know about the support schemes in place, was not eligible or did not apply for financial support (Luzi 2025). In most cases, the characteristics of the places and the way in-migrants are received were more important to migrants than financial support.

The definition of urban-rural migrants differed across municipalities, affecting migrants' self-perception and their eligibility for financial support. We therefore developed a more nuanced concept of urban-rural migration that goes beyond the classification of migrants based on their place of origin and the dichotomy of migration and settlement by incorporating more temporary forms of mobilities, for example individuals who regularly visit the countryside, engage in 'revitalization' projects, volunteering, employment or remote work, thereby providing the human resources needed for rural development (Dilley et al 2024).

In English-language literature, terms like counter-urbanization, back-to-the-land, urban-rural migration, and lifestyle migration are often used interchangeably to describe city dwellers moving to the countryside (Dilley, Gkartzios, and Odagiri 2022; Yan et al. 2023). In Japan, such migrants are called *ijūsha* and are classified as U-turn (returning to their rural hometown), I-turn (moving to a rural area for the first time), or J-turn (moving to a rural area near, but not in, their hometown). Local governments use this UIJ classification to decide

who qualifies for financial aid. However, this oversimplifies migration by focusing only on migrants' place of origin and does not account for the diverse needs of urban-rural migrants. Authorities also differentiate between *ijū* (migration) and *teijū* (settlement), reflecting their goal of retaining permanent residents to combat depopulation. Migrants must repay subsidies if they leave before the required period, which discourages especially younger people, and excludes those who do not fit the rigid categories but could still contribute to rural communities (Luzi 2025).

### 3.4 Urban-rural migration, rural communities and rural revitalization

Migrants negotiate belonging through the dichotomy between migrants and long-term local residents. In two of the four towns, newcomers and established residents coexist in parallel communities, interacting little beyond neighborly exchanges and local events. Many long-term residents consider migrants with some kind of familial link to the town as locals immediately, even if they have never lived in the area before. Kinship distinguishes one newcomer from another. The locals' perception of who belongs to the community significantly impact newcomers' everyday lives. Migrants are sometimes excluded from community activities and face challenges in forming connections with long-term residents and engaging in community life (Luzi 2025).

In a forthcoming publication in the *Handbook of Rural Japan*, the PI (Cornelia Reiher) shows how newcomers imagine community in new ways, overcoming kinship-based notions of family and community. Other migrants demonstrate that community can exist even in the midst of a highly mobile lifestyle by maintaining connections with people in different places transcending older place-based conceptualizations of community. Highly mobile migrants negotiate social relations across urban-rural boundaries and spatial boundaries. Urban-rural migrants and long-term rural residents alike try to achieve similar goals through cooperating and supporting each other where government support is not available or not wanted.

We found that many developments in rural areas stem from individual or collective grassroots initiatives. While not always aimed at challenging the dominant discourse, actions, such as leaving well-paid jobs in Tokyo to embrace rural life or advocating for sexual diversity in rural schools, can become forms of resistance or "informal life politics" (Morris-Suzuki 2020). Social change in rural Japan is partly brought about by urban-rural migrants, but the COVID-19 pandemic despite posing major challenges also enabled new forms of work and mobility that facilitated short- and long-term stays in rural towns and villages (Reiher 2024b). Remote work, for example, increased the number of short-term visitors and some decided to stay. Changing work styles and mobilities are accompanied by and at the same time bring about a shift in rural imaginaries from the rural as a backward place to an interesting place of experi-

mentation where diverse lifestyles are possible. While this change may be subtle in quantitative terms, it is already evident in qualitative terms (Reiher 2024b).

This is also true for migrants' contributions to rural revitalization. Many migrants have started businesses, and contributed to the community by organizing and supporting events, promoting their new hometowns through social media, or serving as active members in local groups and neighborhood associations. Collaboration between long-term residents and newcomers is indispensable to preserve community events like local festivals. Some newcomers have been able to realize their projects only because funding is available from local and prefectural governments. Migrants opened guesthouses, hostels, shared houses, restaurants, and galleries and contribute to the attractiveness of their host communities for locals and tourists alike. The newcomers themselves try to attract more people to town. Spaces like shared houses or guesthouses often serve as catalysts for change in rural areas.

### **3.5 Deviations from the original concept**

When I first designed this project, I focused only on internal urban-rural migration. However, during fieldwork I noticed a growing number of foreign residents in the countryside. While the number of foreigners from Europe, the Americas, and Australia is small, they are highly visible due to their media-covered activities. In contrast, temporary foreign workers from Southeast Asia, who are essential to the local economy, remain largely invisible and lack the freedom, economic benefits, and rights that internal migrants enjoy. This led us to include transnational migrants in our research to explore the hierarchy among different migrant groups in rural Japan (Reiher 2025). A forthcoming article in *Contemporary Japan* (Reiher) examines how financial assistance for foreign workers and residents under the Comprehensive Strategy is applied differently across our field sites, highlighting significant variations in how foreign workers' role for rural revitalization is understood in rural communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly shifted our research focus towards digitalization and social media, as it profoundly affected practices in rural Japan. Negative impacts included a sharp decline in tourism and difficulties for local businesses, along with the suspension of community activities like festivals and village meetings. However, the pandemic fostered innovation, with rural residents adopting new business practices and building personal and professional networks (Reiher 2024). A forthcoming chapter in the *Handbook of Rural Japan* (eds. Paul Hansen and Susanne Klien) examines how rural residents use social media to negotiate community and shows how social media attracts people to the countryside, creates jobs, social connections and community (Reiher forthcoming).

### 3.6 Events and Outreach

Throughout the project all project members presented their work at conferences and workshops. We also organized two conference panels. A list of presentations and events can be found at the project blog: <https://userblogs.fu-berlin.de/urban-rural-migration-japan/>. In 2021, we founded an online study group. The initially small group grew into an international and interdisciplinary group of students and researchers from Europe and Asia who presented and discussed their research on rural Japan. In parallel, the project team regularly met with Prof. Dr. Sachie Oka and her students from Kyūshū University. We also participated in meetings with the “Aso 2.0” research project at the University of Vienna.

We organized three workshops and two working group meetings at the annual conference of the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan in 2021 and 2023. In addition, we invited our project partners for public lectures at Freie Universität Berlin. In February, 2023, the PI organized the two-day international conference “Urban rural migration in Japan and Europe: Transnational and comparative perspectives” in Berlin to discuss our preliminary findings with scholars researching urban-rural migration in Japan and Europe. Eight speakers contributed to a special issue in the renowned *Journal of Rural Studies* (Reiher 2024a).

The project blog became the main venue for outreach. It started in 2021 and in February 2025 features 181 contributions by 62 authors ranging from students to full professors from Asia and Europe. In order to store the blog contributions in a sustainable way, we collaborate with the CrossAsia Open Access Repository hosted by Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. In 2024, selected blogposts were published in the E-book *Lived experiences of crisis in rural Japan: An anthology on the trans-formation of communities and migration during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Reiher 2024b) in the CrossAsia Open Access Repository.

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### 3 Publications/ Veröffentlichte Projektergebnisse

#### 4.1 Publikationen mit wissenschaftlicher Qualitätssicherung

Reiher, C. (2022), "Zieht aufs Land! Strategien japanischer Präfektoren zur Anwerbung von Stadt-Land-Migrant\*innen vor und während der Corona-Pandemie," in: I. Wiczorek, and D. Chiavacci (eds.), *Japan 2022*, München: Ludicum, pp. 281–302, <https://doi.org/10.48796/20230628-018>

Reiher, C. (ed.) (2024a), Virtual Special Issue: "Urban-rural migration in Japan and Europe from a transnational and comparative perspective," *Journal of Rural Studies*, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/10JT11F0VMD>.

Luzi, C. (2025), "The gap between administration and migrants: Terminologies and experiences of urban-rural migration in Japan," *Journal of Rural Studies* 113, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103500>.

Reiher, C. (2025), "(In)visible newcomers: Foreign workers and internal urban-rural migrants in Japan's countryside," *Journal of Rural Studies* 114, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2025.103561>.

#### 4.2 Weitere Publikationen und öffentlich gemachte Ergebnisse (Auswahl)

Reiher, C. (ed.), (2024). *Lived experiences of crisis in rural Japan: An anthology on the transformation of communities and migration during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Berlin: CrossAsia Open Access Repository. <https://doi.org/10.48796/20241202-000> (Open Access).

Luzi, Cecilia and Ngo, Tu Thanh (2024), Conference Report "Urban-rural Migration in Japan and Europe: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives," Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB), February 2–3, 2023, in *ASIEN* 166/ 167: 187-190, [https://asien.asienforschung.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2024/11/13\\_Luzi-Ngo\\_187-190\\_166-67\\_final\\_-1.pdf](https://asien.asienforschung.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2024/11/13_Luzi-Ngo_187-190_166-67_final_-1.pdf) (Open Access).

Reiher, Cornelia (2023), "Studying rural Japan with PhD students during a global pandemic: Experiences from the research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan," in: Sebastian Polak-Rottmann & Antonia Miserka (eds.), *Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic* (= Beiträge zur Japanologie; 50). Wien: Abteilung für Japanologie, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Universität Wien, pp. 142-157, <https://doi.org/10.25365/BZJ-050-013> (Open Access).

Ngo, Tu Thanh (2023), „Overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned from joining a group project in times of turbulence”, in: Sebastian Polak-Rottmann & Antonia Miserka (eds.), *Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic* (= Beiträge zur Japanologie; 50). Wien: Abteilung für Japanologie, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Universität Wien, pp. 158-169, <https://doi.org/10.25365/BZJ-050-014> (Open Access).

Luzi, Cecilia (2023), "Adapting schedules and learning to collaborate: Reflections on a PhD experience in a group project during the pandemic", in: Sebastian Polak-Rottmann & Antonia Miserka (eds.), *Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic* (= Beiträge zur Japanologie; 50). Wien: Abteilung für Japanologie, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Universität Wien, pp. 170-180, <https://doi.org/10.25365/BZJ-050-015> (Open Access).

A list of all publications and blog posts authored by project members is available on the project's blog:

Reiher, Cornelia (ed.) (2021-ongoing), Blog "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan," <https://userblogs.fu-berlin.de/urban-rural-migration-japan/>