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Rural spaces, remote methods: The virtual Aso Winter Field School 2022

The Department of East Asian Studies / Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna and the Aso region in Kumamoto Prefecture are connected by a long history of social, cultural and academic exchange that goes back to pioneer field research conducted at the department in the 1960s (Slawik et al. 1975).

The first generation of students (and later researchers) of Japanese Studies at the University of Vienna gained early experience in qualitative research in a region that their professor and founder of Japanese Studies in Vienna, Alexander Slawik, termed a mesoregion: the Aso region in Kumamoto Prefecture. This first contact laid the groundwork for pioneer field research by the “Vienna School” of Japanese Studies in the 1960s (Slawik et al. 1975). Members of this project included Josef Kreiner (Ryūkyūan and Okinawan studies) and Sepp Linhart (the sociology of work and play in Japan), who would go on to become renowned experts in their fields. Almost half a century later, Wolfram Manzenreiter, the head of the current Department of East Asian Studies in Vienna, initiated the project “Aso 2.0”, revisiting the Aso region with new research questions to gain a long-term perspective on rural social change (Manzenreiter / Lützel 2016). An explicit goal of the project was to introduce students to qualitative field research in rural Japan by supporting their individual research projects and also including them in larger field studies. In 2018, Wolfram Manzenreiter and Antonia Miserka organised a field trip that allowed students to collect data in the same region that Kreiner and his colleagues had visited almost five decades previously (Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). Although the COVID-19 pandemic put a halt to further field trips to Aso, this was not the end of the project. In summer 2021, Manzenreiter and Miserka led a group of students to gather comparative data in a rural community in the Austrian Alps, and in February 2022 we hoped that we would be able to return to Aso with a new group of students. By the end of 2021, however, it became clear that we had been too optimistic. Unable to enter Japan, we switched the “Aso Winter Field School 2022” to an online format.

In this article we reflect on the methodological and practical challenges we faced during this project, discuss how we were able to mitigate some of

these challenges in positive and productive ways, and argue that conducting online field research on rural Japan is both possible and necessary.

We structure our discussion around the impact of a key decision. When we took the Winter Field School online, we stuck to our original research focus on the effects of the pandemic regarding (a) the maintenance of local traditions, (b) community-level social welfare provision, (c) the local tourism industry and (d) urban-to-rural migration. On the one hand, our decision was pragmatic, as over the course of the 2021/2022 winter term we had spent time and effort developing and preparing these research topics in small groups of two to three students and we were keen to build on this work. On the other hand, the decision raised a methodological problem: While the groups working on tourism and urban-to-rural migration could to some extent shift towards gathering data in digital spaces such as websites, blogs and social media, the other groups dealing with the maintenance of local traditions and community-level social welfare provision would be hard pressed to “go digital”. This links to a broader methodological issue: The pandemic has greatly increased attention on and the appreciation of “digital ethnography”, but this lively methodological debate was unable to provide us with the guidance we needed to address the social challenges for older adults in our mostly rural field site during the pandemic. While digital methods allow for innovative research designs in times of travel restrictions and climate change, they also entail the risk of creating (or reinforcing) a bias towards issues taking place in digital spaces mostly inhabited by younger generations. Even projects that explicitly focus on rural Japan tend to concentrate on the lives and experiences of “digitally native” urban-to-rural migrants. In turn, social issues affecting the lives of older adults in rural (and predominantly non-digital) spaces are more difficult to survey and are thus at risk of being overlooked. We believe, however, that these issues are both relevant and important, and so we tried to approach them from a distance. We did so by building on existing contacts in the field to gain (indirect) access to the communities in order to understand the social challenges they faced during the pandemic. Our project is thus best described as an attempt to conduct *remote* fieldwork in rural Japan rather than an exercise in digital ethnography.

Preparing the Winter Field School

How to approach “Aso”

The project consisted of three parts—a preparation class in the winter term 2021/2022, the actual Winter Field School in February 2022 and an analysis class in the summer term 2022. We had already started to work out a schedule

in summer 2021 that included which places to visit and which people to meet. This preparation phase also included the calculation of costs for in-person field research, which was generously supported by The Japan Foundation. From October 2021 until January 2022, we held a weekly preparation class (partly virtual and partly in-person) which focused on the specific characteristics of the Aso region and on how to conduct qualitative research in rural Japan in general and the Aso region in particular. Eleven students enrolled in the course, ten of whom ultimately joined the remote field trip in February. Both undergraduate and graduate students were encouraged to join the class, as we hoped that more experienced students might support those still struggling with communication in Japanese. The group comprised six undergraduate and four graduate students.

Our first task was to familiarise ourselves with ethnographic accounts of rural Japan and with previous and ongoing research on the Aso region. A key question in the first phase was “What is Aso”? We addressed different layers of locality, including geographic, historical, formal-administrative and local residents’ everyday perceptions, and observed the dynamic interplay between these layers and how they had changed over time (e.g., Kelly 2021). From reports of the first Aso research group in the 1960s, we learned about the differences in the composition of hamlets in the area (Kreiner 2000, 101), and from more recent studies we learned about the “multidimensionality and relationality of the ‘local’” in Aso and its varied impact on the well-being of the regions’ inhabitants (Manzenreiter / Holthus 2021, 81).

The region is also heterogeneous in other aspects as well. While population decline is a widely recorded phenomenon in regional Japan (Matanle / Rausch / The Shrinking Regions Research Group 2011; Odagiri 2016), the seven municipalities of the Aso region show strikingly diverse developments in this regard. While the population of Takamori-*machi* declined from 7,300 in 2000 to 5,787 in 2020 and 38.8% of its population were aged 65 or above (2020), Nishihara-*mura*, located outside the caldera of the Aso volcano and close to the prefectural capital of Kumamoto, saw an increase in its population from 5,728 in 2000 to 6,426 in 2020 and exhibited a significantly lower rate of ageing. At the sub-municipal level, the picture becomes even more complex, with significant socio-cultural and socio-economic differences between more densely populated centres and rural peripheries in each municipality. What is considered “Aso”, therefore, consists of municipalities and hamlets which vary greatly in many aspects, including their historical development, social organisation, employment structures and access to public transport. Against this background, we chose to investigate different areas within the region.

Despite its heterogeneity, the Aso region shares a number of common features, which are closely related to its distinctive landscape. All municipalities are located inside or around the caldera of the five craters of the Aso volcano, which plays an important role in local Shinto belief (Kashiwagi 2010). Due to its unique landscape, which consists of vast areas of grassland (*sōgen*) around the volcano and its crater along with numerous hot springs, the region is the most popular tourist destination in Kumamoto Prefecture and includes famous attractions such as Kurokawa Onsen (Minamioguni-*machi*), the Aso Shrine in Ichinomiya (Aso-*shi*) and the water fountains in Hakusui (Minamiaso-*mura*) (Kumamoto-ken shōkō kankō rōdō-bu kankō keizai kōryūkyoku kankō bussan-ka 2019, 19). Our class discussed how the region and the use of Aso's landscape have changed over the course of the previous decades, exemplified by the use of its grassland (Takahashi 2012; Wilhelm 2020). Previous research has shown that while the grassland is still of importance for the region, its usage has been shifting from an agricultural resource to an intangible cultural asset (Takahashi 2012, 26), which has implications for traditional social and cultural practices. For example, while some hamlets have stopped maintaining their grassland due to ageing and de-agriculturalisation, other actors—such as a local NPO—are trying to preserve Aso's distinctive landscape by activating local and non-local volunteers.

Our department's long-term engagement with the Aso region provided us with a rich collection of written sources, material objects and personal connections, all of which helped the students to develop the necessary sensitivity to the region's internal dynamics and disparities. When we began planning the Field School in 2021, being confronted with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic ourselves, we decided to focus on the impact of the pandemic on the region as our guiding theme, which adds a new and topical facet to our long-term engagement with Aso. During the preparatory class, the students formed four groups to tackle different aspects of this topic. As tourism plays a major role in the local economy, one group decided to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the tourism industry. Two of the members of this group had already been working on this topic in other classes and were eager to continue their research during the Field School. Another group interested in local traditions such as festivals and community activities related to the grassland focused on whether or not these activities would take place in the current situation and what adaptations might be necessary. Against the backdrop of frequent disasters such as the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquakes, research on the Aso region has often emphasised the role of local social networks and com-

munity activities as the basis for local disaster resilience (Abe / Murakami 2020). We wanted to know if and how these resilient structures might also play a role during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that physical contact between people was reduced to a minimum at times. As ageing rates keep rising in most parts of the region, the third team chose the topic of social welfare provision during the pandemic and wanted to find out the effect of social distancing on older residents and how local institutions (from communities to local governments) might try to address the problem of loneliness in older adults. With Minamiaso being a popular destination for (urban) migrants, the fourth group focused on their reasons for moving to Aso, their images of the Aso region and how the pandemic affected their lives. Drawing on the experiences of previous field trips to Aso (Manzenreiter 2020; Polak-Rottmann / Manzenreiter 2018) and newly established contacts of one of the project leaders who had just previously conducted field research for his PhD in the region (Polak-Rottmann 2022), we were confident that we could prepare visits to the local town and city halls as well as individual interviews according to our respective research interests. During these preparatory stages, we remained committed to planning in-person fieldwork both logistically and thematically in order not to lose all hope of travelling to Japan—even though our chances to realise our plans were fading as each week passed.

From on-site to online

In November 2021, we finally had to acknowledge that it would be impossible to travel to Japan due to the “entry ban” enacted by the Japanese government in reaction to the first Omicron wave. Having observed the Japanese response since the start of the pandemic, we were not entirely surprised or unprepared as we had anticipated that we might have to switch to an online format at some point. However, being already months-deep into our preparatory course for an in-person field trip and without significant experience of digital fieldwork, the decision to research Aso “from home” was still a major challenge for both students and teachers.

As a result, the second half of our preparation class was focused on how to switch our projects to an online format. As mentioned above, we deliberately decided not to change our research topics, which we considered even more relevant in the light of extended travel restrictions. Drawing on recent hybrid and digital approaches to ethnography (Przybylski 2021), we discussed what it means not to be able to follow the “demands of constantly ‘being there’” (Ugoretz 2021, 62). We also investigated several ways of familiarising

ourselves with the region without being physically present. Materials from our previous visits to Aso, such as tourist maps, pamphlets, bus timetables, etc. provided us with a feeling of what it would be like to travel in Aso. We also embarked on “digital trips” to the Aso region in our preparation class. Using Google Maps, we entered the region, starting at Aso-Kumamoto Airport, observing how close Nishihara-*mura* was to the airport and how we could access the caldera from there. We toured one of the various golf resorts, climbed Mount Aso, walked to the Aso Shrine and investigated how long it would take to drive from the southern municipalities to Aso-*shi*. Students kept an eye on interesting places, tourist sites and restaurants they would like to know more about and visited their homepages. These types of digital walks—both via Google Maps and “live” with the help of partners in Aso—became a crucial element of our Field School in February.

We soon realised that the four groups would have to rely on different strategies to gather useful data. The teams working on tourism and migration quickly found numerous promotion videos, blogs and social media posts, e.g., materials suitable for an actual digital ethnography. The other groups were unable to find such “first-hand” materials. Although the social welfare group could rely on policy plans and statistics provided on the websites of local governments and social welfare councils for a glimpse of how social welfare provision is institutionalised in the Aso region, access to first-hand information on how the pandemic affected everyday life in Aso’s rural peripheries remained out of reach online. To alleviate this problem, we relied mostly on online interviews. As the group leaders, we organised online meetings with informants in the Aso region, thereby activating and extending existing contacts in the field and establishing new contacts through “cold-mailing” respondents of interest. In selecting our respondents, we decided to focus on people we came to refer to as “linking agents” (Heinze et al. 2016) from various parts of the region: most importantly local community leaders (*kuchō* and *burakuchō*), local officials and politicians, and representatives of local welfare councils (*shakai fukushi kyōgikai*), which are quasi-public organisations coordinating formal and informal social welfare provision at the municipal level. We expected these socially embedded “linking agents” to have the technical abilities to feel comfortable in the online interview situation, while at the same time being able to provide detailed information on community-level social issues and potential contacts for follow-up interviews. Using a video conference tool, we also set up meetings with an expert on the tourism industry in Aso as well as workshops with two professors, one working

on the local social structure and religious organisations in Aso and the other on urban-to-rural migration. Through our colleague Johannes Wilhelm, who was living and working as a researcher in Aso for the duration of our project, we were able to virtually “join” a local public event with members of the Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai programme (a government scheme to support urban-to-rural migration), as well as an event with members of an NPO supporting grassland maintenance via a smartphone camera.

In the final stage before the field trip, students prepared digital profiles to introduce themselves and their research project to potential interview partners and also prepared the questions they would like to ask their respondents. We also conducted mock interviews, rehearsed introducing ourselves and our research topics in polite Japanese, and reflected on these experiences and what to expect when interviewing our actual respondents in Aso. With months of preparations behind us and a full schedule ahead of us, we were now ready to dive into our digital Winter Field School.

Virtually on site: The Aso Winter Field School

Our online field trip to the Aso region took place from 11 to 26 February and consisted of 16 days of intensive fieldwork. A crucial goal for those 16 days was to create an atmosphere in which we were constantly engaging with the field in a similar way as if we had actually been there. To achieve this, it was important for us and our participants to meet “on-site” at the campus instead of switching to a fully digital experience. This was made possible by the infrastructure of our institute, which provided us with a screen and high-quality audio equipment in a large room with high ceilings and windows, where we could talk as a whole group or split into smaller ones. We adhered to strict anti-COVID measures (all



Pic. 1: Switching to an online format

of us tested every day before entering the classroom and wore masks). Those of us who did not feel one hundred percent healthy joined the events from home.

Another crucial aspect of creating a productive working atmosphere was our full schedule. Apart from Sundays, we worked eight hours per day, every day. Due to the time difference with Japan (+8 hours), we typically started early in the morning with group interviews or another type of joint event. After these morning events, which lasted between one to three hours, we collected and compared our notes and reflected on the interview situations. We also exchanged preliminary observations and discussed points for further investigation. These discussion rounds were important not only for preparing the following interviews, but also as first steps toward analysis. Afternoons were then filled with preparing questions for the next interviews, contacting potential new respondents, researching and compiling background information and online data, and digitally walking through the Aso region (see Pic. 2).

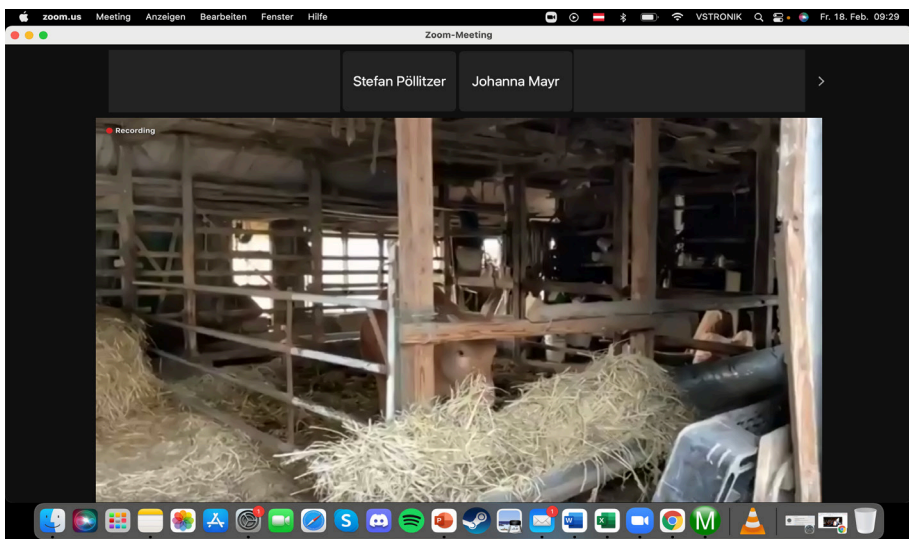


Pic. 2: "Virtual walk" through the Aso region

In these walks, we usually focused on the areas central to our interviews for that particular day. While some of our walks were prepared by students and/or instructors, we also had time to spontaneously decide where to navigate. Wherever available, we used the Google Maps archive function to see how the region had changed over the past few years. This was especially interesting in those places where the Kumamoto Earthquakes had caused se-

rious damage in 2016. We were able to see which parts had been rebuilt and which abandoned, enabling us to speculate how the disaster had placed a visible burden on people's everyday lives (see also Polak-Rottmann 2022). Moreover, the walks illustrated the contrast that several of our respondents had pointed out between the “visibility” of the earthquake and the intangible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Residents had gathered together to deal with the visible damage of the former disaster, but the pandemic created a different type of damage and imposed challenges on the local structures of resilience that were hard to assess.

For our students, one of our most enjoyable live walks was a tour through Minamiaso hosted by our colleague Johannes Wilhelm. Accompanied by his expert commentary and that of a fellow on-site geologist, we visited historical irrigation sites, drove around the southern part of the caldera and met the owner and the non-human inhabitants of a local cattle farm (see Pic. 3). Even without being physically present, this live tour and our camera-supported participation in local events allowed for a deeper and more lifelike engagement with the Aso region and its people.



Pic. 3: Encounter with the locals

The role of students as researchers

The main didactic aim of the Aso Winter Field School was to involve students in the planning, realisation and analysis of a broader research project. While we as instructors had organised the basic framework of the field trip and the

group events, students took responsibility for preparing and conducting the interviews themselves. In the interviews we conducted as a group, those students with a particular interest in the respondents' field of expertise would take the lead, while other students had the opportunity to ask questions. We were impressed by the high level of self-organisation during these events. Whenever a student could not understand something a respondent had said, others would help out by posting the translation in a group chat administered by the students. This form of communication in the online format proved very efficient, and students who did not feel comfortable talking in Japanese could post their questions in the chat and ask others to communicate them. As a team, we were thus able to collect a broader range of interesting comments and questions due to specific features of the online format. The video conference format (we used Zoom for all online events) also allowed the Japanese informants to be clearly seen and heard by everyone.

A major task for students during the pre-organised group events was to request and arrange follow-up interviews. All of the groups were successful in this regard and were fully responsible for conducting these follow-up conversations without the instructors being present. Thus, based on the pre-planned events, students had to manage the whole online interview process by themselves, from inviting respondents, asking permission to use the data, formulating their questions and sending thank-you emails, while our role as instructors was mostly restricted to support with the interview guidelines and formal Japanese expressions. Often students with more advanced Japanese skills stepped in to help those who did not feel confident about their language ability and, here again, the group plus online format proved very useful in alleviating the language-related challenges and insecurities encountered by less experienced students. It was our impression that the autonomy given to students for organising follow-up interviews motivated them to conduct well-planned and productive interviews. In addition to collecting data for their research projects, student feedback showed that they greatly appreciated the opportunity to learn the basic skills of how to hold an interview in Japanese.

Last but not least, the Winter Field School was a social event with all the benefits of meeting face-to-face with other people. As well as preventing our trip to Japan, the pandemic had also inhibited social exchange between students both inside and out of the classroom for almost two years by the time we met together. Our participants not only gained experience as researchers but were also able to be together for 16 days to work together, share experiences, learn how to overcome challenges, get involved in discussions and,

of course, to enjoy break times between the fieldwork sessions. To achieve at least a limited form of international exchange, we set up two joint events with the Global Leader Program at our partner Kumamoto University: an informal “global café”, where we met with Japanese students on the virtual platform www.wonder.me and a more formal closing workshop with a Japanese audience, where each group presented their findings. According to our participants, the social aspects of our project were a major factor in making the Winter Field School such a success. Each of them has reflected on their experiences in a blog¹ written in German.

Data analysis

The project concluded with a follow-up class during the summer term 2022, which focused on analysing the data we gathered at the Field School. The class introduced students to different approaches to qualitative data analysis, including Constructive Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014), Thematic Analysis (Braun / Clarke 2022), Content Analysis (Mayring 2017) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Jäger 2015). Using the software MAXQDA, all groups tried out these methods of analysis with their own data and chose the most suitable. As the coding of data proved to be challenging for many participants, we frequently discussed differences between analytical and descriptive approaches. Eventually, all teams transcribed and coded the interviews for their project. As group leaders, it was a joy to see these projects evolve from the initial planning phase to the analysis and writing stage, and we are happy to present the results of each project through the students’ contributions following this overview.

The challenges and potential of remote (digital) research in rural Japan

It is certainly no overstatement to say that we learned a lot in our 16 days of online research—both in terms of the data and the field research experiences we were able to collect and also in regard to the limitations of our approach. On the positive side, one of our core concerns had been that we might not be able to replicate the intense and sometimes overwhelming experience of “being in the field” online, but this proved to be unfounded. In fact, “intense” was probably the most common expression our students used to describe the Field School. Due to our full schedule and our daily routine, we were quickly able to establish a productive, challenging and indeed immersive research

¹ <https://japanologie.univie.ac.at/asoblog/>

experience. The intense and collaborative work atmosphere with very few distractions for 16 straight days was one of the crucial merits of our remote field trip. Although we lost the chance to experience our field site in person—its feel, taste, sounds and smells remained out of reach—we gained valuable opportunities for regular in-depth discussions about our interview experiences. Moreover, our live walks and the opportunity to join local events allowed for observations that went beyond the limits of an interview study. For example, when we witnessed the public event in which urban-to-rural migrants in the Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai programme introduced their projects, we were able to observe the setting and the atmosphere of such events as well as gaining productive new contacts. On the downside, however, this particular event served to confirm one of the major limitations of remote fieldwork, which is the inability to divert from pre-planned pathways and engage in spontaneous conversations with people in the field—an experience that several students described as particularly frustrating. As teachers, we found that a lack of opportunities to “go with the flow” significantly increases the workload that goes into detailed and time-consuming preparation. Each group event was prepared weeks ahead of schedule with numerous (sometimes dozens) of emails. As we had hoped, we did succeed in securing contacts for follow-up interviews during these hearings, but due to the time difference and the complicated task of coordinating online meetings between us, our contacts in the field and new interview partners via email, we were unable to squeeze all of these follow-up interviews into our 16-day schedule. Luckily, our highly motivated students were willing to conduct interviews in the days and weeks after the project had officially finished, thus turning this problem to our advantage. Had we kept strictly to our 16-day schedule, however, students would have missed these follow-up interviews and we would not have been able to gather the same amount and quality of data. Our planning and realisation of the project was massively facilitated by the fact that we were able to activate contacts in the field and rely on the help of our “eyes and legs” in Aso (Johannes Wilhelm) and support from colleagues in Vienna with close connections to Aso (Antonia Miserka, Wolfram Manzenreiter). In other words, the already established relationship between our department and the Aso region was crucial for the depth and breadth of the project, and it seems very unlikely that our Field School would have proved of such value without these connections.

We did not encounter any technical difficulties during our field trip, and generally had no major negative experiences regarding the use of online

conferencing tools (in our case, Zoom). The group interview situations, for which we gathered in our lecture room and projected our interviewees on a big screen, were generally more formal. This, however, did not come as a surprise and likely would have been similar had we conducted them in person. In the follow-up interviews, which were conducted in a smaller setting via the students' laptop, it was much easier to engage with the interviewees on a personal level. Here, we did not feel that the remote format had any negative effect on our ability to build rapport and gather data. Although the social experience of meeting respondents in person and on-site cannot be fully replicated online, we are confident that the remote format did not affect our main didactic goals and that the major challenges of independently planning, conducting and analysing interviews in Japanese remained more or less the same, and the experience of working as a group may even have been more intense. In fact, it could be said that in some aspects the online format even improved the learning experience as a group. Had we conducted the project on site, it would have been necessary to split our group into smaller teams, which would have meant less group interviews for each student. Moreover, COVID-19 restrictions would have rendered larger group meetings indoors impossible. In this sense, the online format allowed more students to engage in face-to-face interactions with our informants via the camera and to reflect together on this shared experience.

Digital methods and the potential of a “remote perspective” on rural Japan

While we are confident about the didactic benefits of our virtual field trip, what about the quality of the data we collected? Were we able to gain useful insights into the social challenges and changes in everyday life during the pandemic in our mostly rural field sites? There is no easy answer to these questions. Most certainly, we can confirm that the groups working on the more “digitally-accessible” topics (tourism and urban-to-rural migration) were at an advantage, in that they were able to combine their interview data with a huge reservoir of raw data in the form of blogs, YouTube channels and social media profiles that could be used for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. In our experience, a mix between digital ethnographic methods and remote field work (e.g., Zoom interviews) is not only an effective solution when physical access to the field is limited, but can also be highly recommended for providing students with practical experience in field research. Importantly, we believe that this will remain true beyond the pandemic travel restric-

tions and that projects like the Aso Winter Field School have great potential benefit for students with a limited travel budget and for all of us as we try to reduce our carbon footprint.

Not surprisingly, access to the everyday experiences of older respondents remained limited and 16 days was too short a time to generate sufficient ethnographic data regardless of the format. But the online nature of the project created additional limitations on top of the time constraint: Due to the selection of respondents and the lack of opportunities to join social events for older adults and take advantage of spontaneous chats, we talked about the experiences of older residents in rural peripheries more than we talked with these people. Thus, we gained little insight into how older residents themselves perceived isolation, community solidarity and the cancellation/maintenance of social and religious events during the pandemic, or what such events mean for their everyday lives. There is, however, a positive way of looking at these limitations: In our interviews with public and semi-public figures such as village/district heads, representatives of social welfare councils and local officials, we gathered valuable second-hand information about the various challenges facing rural communities in the Aso region. And maybe more importantly, we gained first-hand accounts of the social roles and the self-image of our respondents, whom we came to view as “linking agents” not only between us as remote researchers and rural communities but also between these communities and local administrations and welfare providers. The density, the level of institutionalisation, the local variations and not least the flexibility of these vibrant state-society links are a fascinating finding that was facilitated specifically by our remote approach, and we intend to pursue this in more detail in a separate article. In conclusion, despite its limitations, we found that remote research on rural non-digital spaces is not only possible but can also provide new and important perspectives on social processes that are easily overlooked when we focus only on data we can access on-site or by digital ethnography.

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