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## The promotion of migration through the local Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai in Minamiaso

The ageing population and depopulation of rural areas are major problems in modern-day Japan (see Matanle et al. 2011; Lützel et al. 2020). As a countermeasure to the growing issue of “underpopulated areas” (*kaso chiiki*), including areas with a certain degree of depopulation that are classified as underpopulated by the government, the state has implemented the Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (COKT—Regional Revitalization Cooperation Programme) volunteer programme for community revitalisation (Sōmushō 2022a). Financial support is provided by the government, the exact amount of which is decided by the degree of depopulation and the percentage of ageing population in the area (Sōmushō 2020). COKT sponsors the projects of predominantly young people who wish to work towards the revitalisation of a region, to experience life in a rural area, and to work in various areas throughout Japan. Our focus here is on COKT activities in one community of the Aso region, namely Minamiaso in Kumamoto Prefecture. Minamiaso is classified as *kaso chiiki* (Ippan shadan hōjin zenkoku kaso chiiki renmei n.d.) with an ageing rate of 43% (Minamiaso-mura 2022b).

In this paper, we explore the online promotion of Minamiaso by the local COKT, juxtaposing the advertised content with the pull factors mentioned by migrants to the region. We focus on the following questions: How does the local COKT promote migration to the Aso region online and how are the experiences of migrants in Minamiaso portrayed? Which aspects of the region are presented as important pull factors? In addition to the 13 videos on the YouTube channel of *Nan!!GOStation* (南GO!!Station), run by members of the Minamiaso COKT, we also took part in one of their public events and conducted an interview with current COKT members. The data from those interviews and videos was analysed using Thematic Analysis by Braun and Clarke (2022) and categorised into four themes: “looking for fresh water and abundant na-

ture”, “breaking free from hectic city life”, “entering the local community”, and “getting used to Minamiaso’s downsides”.

We will start by elaborating the current research progress on the revitalisation of rural areas and explaining our research interest. We will then present the results of our analysis and, lastly, will describe the relevance of our study for current research on this topic.

## Literature review

Previous qualitative research on the topic of urban-rural migration highlights economic factors (Tanigaki 2018) and concepts such as “nature”, “accommodation” and “food” (for the case of the town of Hokuto in Yamanashi prefecture, see Takahashi et al. 2021). The various individual reasons for rural migration (e.g., I-turner and U-turner<sup>1</sup>) have been covered by qualitative research in the area of lifestyle migration (Klien 2020), which has also been studied from various perspectives (Benson 2009; Benson 2014; Benson / O’Reilly 2009; Benson / Osbaldiston 2016). Lifestyle migration is a relatively new phenomenon and is defined as the permanent or temporary emigration of relatively wealthy people to a rural area in search of a higher quality of life (Benson / O’Reilly 2009, 609), thus leading to a significant change in lifestyle (Benson / O’Reilly 2009, 616). Although the search for a higher quality of life is part of other types of migration as well (e.g., refugees), in this specific type of migration the search is connoted as a preference for a certain lifestyle (Benson / O’Reilly 2009, 620).

Other authors use qualitative questionnaire surveys to better understand the effects of migration, for example, regarding the socio-economic circumstances of I-turners who move to a rural area (Obikwelu et al. 2017). Literature is also available on the socio-economic challenges of rural Japan, caused by the decline in population in peripheral regions that focus on asset-based development instead of local efforts from within the region (Feldhoff 2012). Research on the connection between demographic decline and migration in general has also been done (Ishikawa 2011). Case studies focusing on the role of *michi no eki*—roadside stations—in Suzu, Ishikawa prefecture in revitalising rural Japan help us understand revitalisation in general (Murakami / Oyabu 2016). Matsumoto, Shinohara and Sawaki (2014) contend that mostly young people are expected to help with local event organisation and the development and promotion of local products. However, the inhabitants of these areas seem unable to share their visions for revitalisation, making collaborative

1. The term I-turner refers to migrants with little to no prior connection to the area seeking a new way of living, while U-turners are migrants returning to an area in which they have lived before (Miserka 2018, 22–3).

work difficult. Shishido (2015) examines how the COKT programme is organised and implemented by local governing bodies. This study sheds light onto problems within the programme, such as termination of contracts and mental health problems among members, while a study of migration to Taketa, in Ōita prefecture, gives us more insight into the organisation's connections with different actors involved in the revitalisation strategies of the COKT programme (Reiher 2020).

Existing literature on migration to the Aso region provides a strong framework for our study: Miserka (2018, 2020) uses quantitative and qualitative research methods to explore the factors that have contributed to the decision of interviewees to migrate to the area, and why they view the region as being an attractive area worth moving to (Miserka 2020, 7). Connectedness to nature, strong social structures, contrast to the fast life of cities and high-quality water resources are among the strong pull-factors that counteract any infrastructure lacking in the region (Miserka 2020, 26–7).

Our main aim in the following pages is to explore how the local COKT chapter in Minamiaso promotes migration to the region using online resources, and thus contribute to research on revitalisation measures in rural Japan. As suggested by the abovementioned literature, migration as a phenomenon in Japanese society today is a well-researched topic. Therefore, we explicitly focus on the work of one actor (COKT) and their portrayal of migration to a certain region as part of their agenda, to draw conclusions regarding this promotion and reality.

## Analysis

The COKT programme is funded by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications and intended as a measure to counteract Japan's ageing and decreasing population in rural areas. According to the official budget for the Regional Support Division (*Chiikichikara sōzō gurūpu*) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the programme received a budget of 500 million yen in 2022 (*Sōmushō 2022b*). The budget of the municipality of Minamiaso also included funding for COKT activities amounting to a little more than 20 million yen, which is divided among the different projects (*Minamiaso-mura sōmuka 2022*). Based on interviews with COKT members, Figure 1 demonstrates how the different actors are connected and influence the COKT's work on migration.

The COKT chapter receives government funding for working on local projects assigned by the local government (*yakuba*). Each chapter has a hierarchical structure consisting of a leader (*kachō*) and members using a

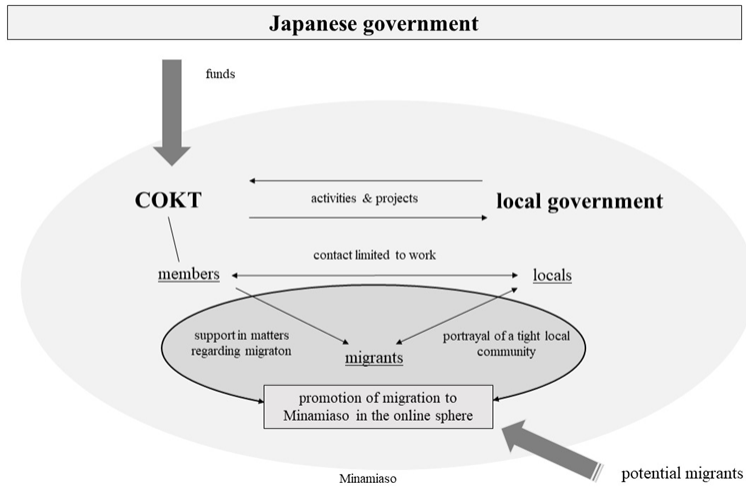


Fig. 1: Actors in the promotion of migration by the COKT in Minamiaso

*senpai-kōhai* relationship system. Although its members migrate to the rural area in question, COKT members have mentioned not working closely with locals, and except for the yearly presentations (*happyōkai*), which we attended online in February 2022, they rarely have (official) contact with the local community. (Potential) migrants, in contrast, receive guidance and counseling from COKT members when moving to Minamiaso, and members of the local COKT have also stated that helping the region through their projects in various activities to promote migration to and settlement in the Aso region (*ijū teijū katsudō*) is of great importance to the members.

The *Nan!!GOStation* YouTube channel presents 12 interviews with migrants (Tab. 1, see Appendix), most about three to five minutes long. We categorised the experiences of those interviewed and the data gathered from an interview conducted with current COKT members into four main themes that are prevalent for the local COKT in their promotion of migration.<sup>2</sup>

**Looking for fresh water and abundant nature:** The first theme we identified is a focus on the clean water and abundant nature around Minamiaso, which is highly present in the COKT's online activities. All those interviewed and all migrants shown in the YouTube videos emphasise and prioritise these characteristics when asked about their reason(s) for moving to the Aso region. Minamiaso's natural surroundings and weather conditions are described as beneficial for agriculture and tourism, the main sectors in which the presented migrants work. While some people mentioned that they actively decided

<sup>2</sup> From here on, the term "migrants" refers to migrants interviewed and presented by COKT online.

to move to Minamiaso with the aim of founding a new career in agriculture, most said that spending time in nature in Minamiaso or taking up gardening as a new hobby has been a great advantage. On the COKT's website dedicated to migration and in the YouTube videos, these two characteristics are used to visually represent the region. Minamiaso refers to itself as the "birthplace of water", a slogan that the COKT takes up in their work, describing Minamiaso as follows on their website:

Live every day enjoying Aso. This is the birthplace of water. Here we have a beautiful landscape overlooking Mount Aso, onsen with a variety of qualities, springs such as Shirakawa Suigen, a natural environment recognised as a World Agricultural Heritage site, and agricultural produce grown in the abundant spring water ... Minamiaso is a home for everyone, where people and nature coexist. (Teijū Sokushinka 2022)

Photos of scenery and water are used to paint a picture of a calm and relaxing environment conducive to growth and personal fulfilment, and remind readers of a recreational place. Life in the Aso region is presented as a never-ending vacation—a lifestyle that can be achieved by settling there.

**Breaking free from hectic city life:** Personal fulfilment is not only a main theme in the visual representation of the Aso region, but also a dominant thread when migrants tell of their experiences. One migrant describes these experiences as follows:

When I lived in the city, I mainly travelled by car, but I felt stressed by traffic jams and crowds. Since I came here, first of all, there are no traffic jams and no crowds. It's a spacious place, so it's more pleasant. (Video 8 2021)

Lifestyle migration, as it is called by Benson and O'Reilly (2009), appears to be a driving cause of migration to the Aso region. Numerous migrants mention choosing Minamiaso in search of a quiet life for themselves and/or their children. The COKT reacts to this desire by using imagery presenting the region as a place of serenity on their website and YouTube videos. The website promotes this lifestyle by romanticising rural life. Each video starts with an introduction briefly presenting the migrant being interviewed along with a schedule roughly outlining how the migrant spends their (ideal) day. Images additionally underline the rural lifestyle, which consists of more traditional and/or innovative work that benefits the region, and allows the target audience to gain an understanding of the region and its inhabitants' seemingly

simple yet enriching lifestyle. After settling in Minamiaso, these migrants see their life as being slower paced and more down-to-earth than it was in the city.

**Entering the local community:** After showcasing the characteristics of the Aso region and the apparently idyllic lifestyle that is portrayed as prevailing throughout, the COKT rounds off its presentation of Minamiaso by showcasing the contributions of new members to the local community as a support system for the region. Many interviews underline how warm and welcoming the locals in Minamiaso are towards migrants. From taking care of children to sharing homegrown vegetables with their neighbours, Minamiaso is shown as having a close-knit local community that easily welcomes new arrivals, implying that migrants must actively seek out the local community by joining activities such as local sports clubs or the firefighter brigade. Once a part of the local community, one can count on strong support and guidance by locals. This creates the image of one big family who helps each other out. Visually, this is underlined in the official video promoting migration to Minamiaso with footage of children playing together, people eating together, and the joint pursuit of cultural activities such as *taiko* or *noyaki*. The local community is presented as a support system with a seemingly long tradition and members from different age groups, therefore evoking associations with a family.

**Getting used to Minamiaso's downsides:** The COKT's portrayal acknowledges the downsides of life in Minamiaso but puts them into perspective. All interviewed migrants seem to agree that Minamiaso has no disadvantages that are impossible to become accustomed to, with the cold winter climate being the greatest disadvantage for many people. While some migrants state that the weak infrastructure may pose a problem for its inhabitants now and in the future, they are convinced that they can either get used to such demerits (e.g., *kuruma shakai*, "car society") or that the advantages prevail, overshadowing the region's downsides. The YouTube videos bring up one, usually rather general, negative aspect (such as the cold winter weather) before immediately moving on to talk about Minamiaso's advantages. This leaves no room to contemplate the downsides and underscores the idealistic and idyllic representation of the region. Furthermore, the COKT does acknowledge aspects such as the ageing population (*kōreika*) in Minamiaso, instead presenting it as a matter of fact that does not need to be further elaborated on. By doing so, the issue is presented as unchangeable and irrelevant for the promotion of the positive aspects of life in Minamiaso.

## Discussion

The local COKT adopts an approach based on how other actors portray Minamiaso. While water and nature are themes present in all media related to the Aso region, the COKT adds to it by telling a story of a strong community, welcoming to migrants and resembling a family, that forms the basis of life in Minamiaso. The COKT herewith conveys and sells a lifestyle unique to the region that is also present in various actors' representations.

The pull factors we found are in line with Miserka's (2020) results. This means that the COKT in Minamiaso draws on what other migrants consider advantageous when settling in the Aso region, specifically water quality, abundant nature, and the opportunity to start a new life and/or lifestyle. While the migrants in Miserka's study have a more self-aware approach to life in Aso, the COKT presents only migrants who are fond of the place and can "get accustomed" to its downsides. It is little surprising that the COKT, an actor wishing to promote migration, focusses on positive aspects, but also worth noting that the pull factors are mostly in line with the experiences and motivations of migrants not presented by the COKT.

The COKT takes a rather subtle approach in their promotion of migration that focusses on the portrayal of the region while scarcely elaborating on the act of migration. Making use of the region (e.g., the water, grasslands and volcano), which is a major touristic area well-known throughout Japan, the COKT has no need to invent new attractions. Rather, by emphasising the long existing ones, the region is able to shine in its own right, creating more subtle incentives to migrate to Minamiaso. When promoting migration, the COKT emphasises natural attractions that subtly create the desirable image of a tourist-like lifestyle. Human-made attractions, such as the statues of characters from the well-known manga and anime series *One Piece*, found throughout the region, are ignored in this type of promotion. This leads us to assume that the marketing efforts address the preconceived notion of an idealised (pastoral) rural life, something that is also achieved by evoking emotions and memories. Especially in the YouTube videos, migrants are often interviewed in their own homes, with family members present, and then also outside in nature. Moreover, they compare migrating to Aso as the fulfilment of a long-desired dream or the return to one's childhood memories. This portrayal draws on the motivations of lifestyle migrants as elaborated by Klien (2020), evoking a strong connection to rural life as "salvation" from the hectic city life. This representation primarily targets young couples or married couples with small children (e.g., persons easily able to adapt to rural life) by

mainly featuring migrants that fit the target group. It should be mentioned, however, that the members of the COKT themselves do not necessarily fit into this group of potential migrants, as they, for instance, include people older than the migrants presented in the videos (Minamiaso-mura 2022a). This discrepancy, among others, leads us to assume the creation of a social distance between the members of the COKT, local residents, and other migrants, defining the organisation as a force from outside of the local community rather than as an internal effort.

These findings support the results of Reiher (2020), who concludes that due to its dependence on government funds, the COKT in Taketa has a limited capacity to mitigate the effects of Japan's ageing society. In Minamiaso, the same appears to be the case. By targeting the specific group of people who can afford to take up this new rural lifestyle (e.g., rather young and wealthy couples) and by romanticising rural life and downplaying the practical issues of life in Minamiaso, it is more likely to have the effect of drawing people from wealthier and more educated social classes to rural areas. The average urban worker seems left out of the representation. This type of marketing aims at a small segment of potential migrants and offers no practical information, as it never mentions infrastructure, job opportunities or social welfare. Moreover, none of the migrants in the videos were drawn to the area by the efforts of the organisation. In order to counteract the problems in Japan's rural areas, different measures must be taken in the future. While the COKT, one official programme, contributes to the solution, its impact is small, showing that large-scale structural measures and a more impactful and inclusive publicity campaign will be necessary in the future to revitalise rural Japan.

Our work has shown that the COKT in Minamiaso promotes life in Minamiaso to a specific target group and social class, which the COKT members are also part of. Downsides of the region are mentioned only in passing and serious dangers (e.g., natural disasters) and practical issues (e.g., insufficient infrastructure) are downplayed and romanticised. Further, interpersonal issues such as difficulties being accepted into a tight local community as a complete outsider are also left out. Therefore, as the discussion of the themes above suggests, we have found that the COKT acts within its own sphere, attempting to attract like-minded (potential) lifestyle migrants.

## Reflections

Although we first thought online research to be quite limiting, the process taught us a great deal about accessing information online and the degree of



flexibility needed when examining a region while physically being in another country. Compared to other groups, we considered ourselves lucky to have a research interest that can be very well examined in the online sphere and for which it was not necessary to physically be in Japan. At the same time, however, we learned that some information is simply not accessible online without the right contacts. This meant that we had to be flexible and prepare well for our interview and event, as we did not have a way to easily contact our interviewees again in case of additional questions.

In February 2022, when we were conducting most of our interviews, we also had a discussion about whether by conducting online research we were engaging in actual field research, which we would now like to continue. Instead of asking whether online field work can be considered “real”, it is more important to look at what we achieved. Regardless of the field, online research will always have more limitations compared to physically conducting research in the field. These are, however two entirely different methods, and thus lack comparability. Especially for our research interest, online research worked well, as we had access to data and were able to meet online with COKT members due to prior contacts. In contrast to conventional field research in the physical sphere, online ethnographic research does also have some advantages, such as working from the comfortable position of one’s own home with little financial effort, being able to access online data in real time instead of having to wait for the next Wi-Fi connection and saving time by being able to multitask our engagement in the field with other relevant tasks during the research process. Therefore, we think that online research will slowly become a new method for conducting ethnographic research that has limitations, but also many strengths such as additional flexibility in the research process when applied to a fitting research interest.

As student researchers, we gained a great deal of insight into how research is conducted and about how to conduct ethnographic research in Japanese studies. We were responsible for our projects, which means that we were able to work freely on what we planned, with our mentors providing guidance upon request. This allowed us the great responsibility of not only managing the research *per se*, but also of managing time and distributing the various tasks within our team. Before starting this project, we studied the Aso region and were given an introduction to the four topics of our group (local traditions, community-level social welfare, the local tourism industry, and migration), from which we chose one specific aspect for our own project. After choosing the topic and forming a small research team, we began

the actual research process by ourselves. Great trust was given to us to finish this project despite having no previous experience in “real” research, as our group was made up of undergraduate students. While we sometimes struggled with insecurities regarding academic research and writing, the autonomy also made us learn a great deal about what it means to be a researcher. Although we still have a long way to go, we are grateful to have had the opportunity to learn about the Aso region and to participate in this unique project.

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## Appendix

No.	Link	Uploaded
1	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1xMxA9iWfQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1xMxA9iWfQ</a>	12 March 2018
2	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ITeml-QNic">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ITeml-QNic</a>	01 May 2018
3	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH8MHMVHRs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH8MHMVHRs</a>	28 May 2019
4	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFRt6GbcidE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFRt6GbcidE</a>	10 October 2019
5	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqvSN6JRxIE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqvSN6JRxIE</a>	14 February 2020
6	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnxKiuPU_KI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnxKiuPU_KI</a>	4 March 2020
7	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV1SA1G5xuo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV1SA1G5xuo</a>	28 October 2020

No.	Link	Uploaded
8	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iyHG8gEj9U">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iyHG8gEj9U</a>	4 March 2021
9	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOVu2f9S-OY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOVu2f9S-OY</a>	9 March 2021
10	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlIFevHhGUo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlIFevHhGUo</a>	30 March 2022
11	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWdhgTGvq7M">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWdhgTGvq7M</a>	30 March 2022
12	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhX_Po4DG_Q">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhX_Po4DG_Q</a>	31 March 2022
PR	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMIN8jupFt4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMIN8jupFt4</a>	2018

(last accessed 8 July 2022)

Table 1: Overview of analysed YouTube videos