Cornelia Reiher

Studying rural Japan with PhD students during a global pandemic: Experiences from the research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan"

I am a Berlin-based scholar studying rural Japan, local identities and the complex relationship between national policies for rural revitalisation and local revitalisation practices. In my previous work, I have argued that since the central government often fails to acknowledge and address the needs of municipalities, local actors creatively appropriate various programmes and policies according to their own needs. At the same time, local actors' visions and practices of rural revitalisation are strongly constrained by ideas of rurality and rural development inherent in government programmes and funding schemes. Because the Japanese government's funding programmes often focus on one or two cultural or historical traits of rural communities, many municipalities in rural Japan reduce their communities to a somewhat narrow and exclusive local identity. In one town I studied, this contributed to closed social structures, which made it difficult for newcomers to participate in local community activities and to contribute their skills and knowledge to revitalisation efforts. This prevented migrants from playing a role in rural revitalisation (Reiher 2010, 2014).

Later, when I worked on a project about food safety and conducted fieldwork in several locations in urban and rural Japan (e.g., Reiher 2012, 2016, 2017), I came across many farmers who were newcomers to the countryside. I also realised that some local governments put tremendous efforts into attracting urbanites and explicitly linked in-migration to local revitalisation plans (Reiher 2020). The different practices with regard to local government support for in-migration in my different field sites inspired me to study rural revitalisation practices in Kyūshū from the perspective of urban-rural migration. I applied for funding for a research project on urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan to compare support for in-migration, local governments' conceptualisations of urban-rural migration as part of their

revitalisation strategies and the experiences of urban-rural migrants in four municipalities in Kyūshū.

I was pleased when the German Research Foundation (DFG) granted me funding for this research project in March 2020, but at this time Berlin was already in its first COVID-19 lockdown. Nevertheless, I hired two research assistants, Cecilia Luzi from Italy and Ngo Tu Thanh (Frank) from Vietnam, to work on the project with me. We were lucky to get them to Berlin before borders were closed (again). In the beginning of October 2020, we were able to meet in person a few times, but joint lunches and on-site meetings came to an end in November when we had to work from home. A long period of online meetings and online classes began and continued until spring 2022.

Drawing on experiences from this project, I will reflect on my collaboration with PhD students in a joint research project on rural Japan heavily reliant on fieldwork under the conditions of a global pandemic. After a short outline of our project, I will discuss three of the challenges we faced: Firstly, the challenge to prepare the team for fieldwork in Japan although it was uncertain if and when this fieldwork would actually take place; secondly, the challenge to build a team remotely; and thirdly, the challenge to negotiate each team member's role in the research project within the academic system in Germany against the backdrop of various translation issues. But rather than just retelling our experiences as a story of hardship, difficulties and uncertainties—which is how it felt at times—I will also focus on the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our project, as it served to open up new perspectives and methodologies, enabled new spaces and occasions for mutual learning and enhanced collaboration in significant ways.

The research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan"

Internal migration flows worldwide are usually directed from rural to urban areas, pushing people out of the countryside towards cities. This is particularly true for Japan, where rural areas have faced out-migration, deindustrialisation and population ageing for decades, resulting in rural development being discussed in rather pessimistic ways (Koyanagi 2016; Lützeler 2018; Manzenreiter / Lützeler / Polak-Rottmann 2020; Masuda 2014; Ōno 2008). Recently, however, publications both within and beyond academia that view rural development more positively are booming in Japan (e.g., Hashimoto 2015; Klien 2020; Sakuma et al. 2017; Yamanō 2018). This is partly due to an upturn in urban-rural migration. Contrary to the prevailing trend of people leaving rural areas for the city, an increasing number of people have become interested

in relocating from urban to rural areas and a growing number have actually made this move (Odagiri 2015; MLIT 2018). According to media coverage and organisations that promote and support urban-rural migration, this trend increased even further during the COVID-19 pandemic (Furusato Kaiki Shien Sentā 2022; Motohashi / Matsuoka 2020; Tanahashi 2020). However, outmigration from the cities is still small in numerical terms and is not evenly distributed among Japan's regions as peripheral prefectures receive fewer migrants than those closer to urban centres (Reiher 2022).

Many scholars suggest that in-migration of educated and creative people has a positive impact on rural revitalisation and thus on the future of rural communities in Japan (see Hatayama 2015; Kitano 2009; Koyanagi 2016; Odagiri 2015; Rausch 2008). However, there is little empirical evidence for this assumption. With a focus on Kyūshū, Japan's most southern main island, our research project aims to understand how urban-rural migration impacts rural revitalisation by empirically studying the interlinkage between urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation with a focus on local practices, mobilities and national policies. We analyse how urban-rural migration challenges local social structures, power inequalities between centres and their peripheries, and central-local relations in Japan. In short, we investigate how mobilities contribute to the reconfiguration of rural spaces in Japan.

Urban-rural migration is not unique to Japan. Retirees seeking relaxed sunset years and younger people striving for more sustainable lifestyles move to the countryside in many post-industrial societies (e.g., Baumann 2018; Benson / O'Reilly 2009; Brown et al. 2008; Bu 2017; Costello 2009; Stockdale et al. 2013). What is notable about Japan are the programmes and subsidies initiated by different stakeholders to attract people to move (or move back) to rural Japan and in turn to revitalise local economies and agriculture. We compare how municipalities of similar size in different prefectures in Kyūshū appropriate these programmes and study their impact on in-migration, in-migrants' experiences and local rural revitalisation practices in the respective municipalities. In order to understand the different trajectories of urban-rural migration, we compare different types of urban-rural migration according to their initiation by central and local governments, civil society and business actors. While the literature on urban-rural migration in Japan has mainly focused on individual factors influencing relocation and urban-rural migrants' experiences (Klien 2016, 2019, 2020; Miserka 2019; Nakagawa 2018; Obikwelu et al. 2017; Rosenberger 2017), our project analyses both the individual experiences of urban-rural migrants and local revitalisation practices as well as central government's rural development policies and their local appropriation and implementation.

For comparison, we chose four municipalities in different prefectures in Kyūshū. The prefectures have all developed different visions for regional revitalisation and the promotion of in-migration. Therefore, the prefectural level will be one level of comparison that also impacts local governments' agendas via funding schemes. As comparing four municipalities and multi-level governance based on qualitative data is an impossible endeavour for one researcher to accomplish in three years, I work with two doctoral research assistants, each from a different academic background (anthropology and political science) and working on a distinct research project. They collect data in two different municipalities in Nagasaki and Fukuoka prefectures to complement my data. My own project focuses on individual experiences of in-migrants, local social and support structures, social dynamics and community institutions, as well as revitalisation policies in two municipalities in Saga and Ōita prefectures, and studies support schemes initiated by the local governments and both prefectural governments. Based on all the team members' data, I will analyse the complex web that exists between local discourses and practices and national policies and contexts in order to better understand the relationship between urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan.

Each of the two subprojects emanate from different perspectives. The first subproject analyses the nexus of urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation from the perspective of Japan's central and local governments and combines policy analysis with the study of local actors' agency. The second subproject studies urban-rural migration from the bottom up and involves ethnographic research in two municipalities in Kyūshū. It explores newcomers' and return migrants' everyday practices in their respective rural communities and examines their integration into community activities and their contribution to rural revitalisation.

Fieldwork and method education against the backdrop of Japan's travel ban

Both data collection and analysis for our project are conducted qualitatively and aim at theory building. We initially wanted to make data via ethnographic fieldwork, formal and informal interviews and content analysis of documents and visual materials produced by different stakeholders on local, prefectural and national levels. I assumed that with this multi-method data-collection strategy, the team would be able to merge micro and macro perspectives and make rich and reliable data. However, this approach requires access to Ja-

pan, method training and practice with the research assistants in Japan. We had planned to conduct fieldwork together during a short exploratory trip to Japan in our first year, which had to be cancelled due to Japan's travel ban during the pandemic. During this first trip, I had wanted to introduce my research assistants to our field sites and research participants, arrange housing for the team, conduct first interviews and meet with collaboration partners at Japanese universities. In addition, (but as what actually turned into a backup plan) I had arranged for my research assistants to participate in the method courses I teach every year at Freie Universität (FU) Berlin. However, due to the pandemic, most interview practice during these courses took place online.

The challenge was to prepare the team for fieldwork in Japan although it was uncertain if and when this fieldwork would actually take place. Throughout the project, our team experienced hope and disappointments with regard to our fieldwork plans. We postponed the beginning of our fieldwork to October 2021 and from spring 2021 began arranging affiliations with universities in Japan, contacted the municipalities where we wanted to conduct field research and hoped that visa applications to Japan would be possible again after we had all been vaccinated that summer. But since we could not be sure we would be able to go to Japan, we were constantly thinking about a Plan B and conducted initial online interviews and searched through myriads of blogs, videos, policy documents and social media accounts of municipalities and prefectural offices. We slowly began to accept that we would probably have to approach fieldwork as hybrid research and learn to appreciate the opportunities offered by the digital world. Nevertheless, more than anything, we still hoped to engage in onsite fieldwork and meet our research participants in person. The uncertainty was much harder for Cecilia, a trained anthropologist who has conducted ethnographic research before, than for Frank, a political scientist whose project relies heavily on the analysis of policies and plans.

But we soon discovered that migrants connect, document and express their migration experiences via social media, blogs and their own websites and that hybrid ethnography might well prove a very productive approach, as people often blend their online and offline worlds (Przybylski 2021). Social media have played an important role for organising protests in post-Fukushima Japan, including anti-nuclear protests and student protests against the revision of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution in 2015 (Liscutin 2011; O'Day 2015; Slater / Nishimura / Kindstrand 2012). Such media are equally impor-

tant for migrants communicating with each other and with their families, friends and business partners, keeping in touch with those far away, sharing experiences and providing useful information about (living in) the host communities with other migrants and disseminating information about projects and events.

We began to analyse social media data qualitatively and quantitatively, counting, documenting and mapping followers, comments, sharing and reposting of online content and coverage in other media. We systematically searched, selected and saved social media content produced by migrants and local authorities, and also made data via interaction with migrants through online interviews and writing messages on Instagram, thereby co-producing new content (Kozinets 2020, 7). The concept of "hybridity" also carried the promise of moving offline and beginning research in the field at some point in the future. Thus, it was also a psychological strategy for not giving up hope of eventually conducting fieldwork in Japan even after Japan lifted its COVID-induced entry ban in November 2021 but almost immediately closed the borders again in December, forcing us to postpone our field research yet again.

It was not only our research that moved online, it was also our research participants. Compared to Berlin, the COVID-19 pandemic in my field sites was mild with no fatalities reported and the number of infections very low. Each of the two towns I am studying has a population of about 20,000 and, as of July 15, 2022, the total number of infections recorded since the beginning of the pandemic was 419 in Taketa and 952 in Arita (Taketa-shi 2022; Arita-chō 2022). Neither town experienced lockdowns, school closures or curfews, but tourism, local cultural and commercial events, meetings of neighbourhood associations and other social gatherings and access to local government facilities were cancelled, restricted, postponed or moved online. For example, Arita's Ceramics Fair, the major annual event to boost sales from local kilns, was cancelled in 2020 and 2021 and replaced with an online event in both years (Saga Shinbun 2020). Just like the potters in Arita, local tourism and retail businesses were hit hard everywhere in rural Japan. Because I am paying particular attention to migrants and locals who are artisans and artists, I learned that many artisans who relied on tourists as customers, onsite exhibitions in big cities in Japan and teaching courses had to change their business strategies, just like we had to change our research strategies.

Most of the research participants I have interviewed so far online reported that their everyday life has not changed for the worse during the pandemic

and some have even enjoyed the interruption of their work routine, because they have had more time for walks, exploring neighbouring areas and enjoying nature—precisely the kinds of things they moved to the countryside for in the first place. However, as physical contacts were limited, their range of movement contracted. Many migrants were unable to visit their families in Tōkyō or Yokohama for New Year and they could not or did not want to travel abroad or to other large cities for business or for meeting friends. At the same time, the scope of their activities in the online world was expanding and many started to connect with people across the globe via social media and online communication platforms more widely than they had done previously, just like our research team.

Neither I nor my research assistants were used to digital and hybrid methods, so we started to study online research methods together initially in online study groups and later in offline study groups. We all had to move out of our comfort zones, but we could discuss our experiences and learn from each other. One of my earliest experiences with online research was in April 2021 when I participated in an online event for prospective urban-rural migrants, organised by a prefectural government in Kyūshū that introduced the Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (COKT) programme. This programme was initiated by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (Sōmushō) in 2009 and provides municipalities in rural Japan with resources to promote revitalisation activities and encourage people from urban areas to move to their communities (Reiher 2020). The event was chaired by an employee from the prefectural office, two COKT participants from different towns spoke about their experiences and two employees from the municipal halls of the respective towns introduced their municipalities.

I approached this event as I would have approached any event during onsite fieldwork and made notes during and after the event. On the downside, the format only allowed for one-way communication. Zoom was set so that only speakers were visible, so I could not tell how many other people participated in the event and was unable to approach the speakers or members of the audience after the presentations to introduce myself and ask for interviews. However, the event provided me with valuable insights into the proceedings of such events and into topics of interest and concern for COKT members, municipalities and prospective applicants to the programme. I was also able to get to know people I later contacted via email and received information about other online events. Even though this fieldwork took place at my desk in my home office, it brought back some of the excitement of onsite

fieldwork. I had been a little nervous because I had not known what to expect, but it helped me to feel closer to the field and it was inspiring to learn about people's experiences and perspectives on relocation to rural Kyūshū and the COKT programme.

Based on my own positive experience, I recommended that my team members should go ahead and start online interviews, social media analysis and the analysis of prefectures' and municipalities' promotional videos instead of waiting for Japan to reopen. Frank began online interviews with policy makers in Tōkyō in October 2021, which were a source of valuable data as well as a means of gaining access to the field. This was a great advantage when he finally set off to Japan in May 2022 for his six months of fieldwork, because he was able to begin interviews right away. Cecilia began with mapping her field sites and networks of in-migrants in her two towns based on an analysis of Instagram accounts before contacting migrants for online interviews via Instagram. She recalls this as being a positive experience that enabled her to produce her first data and at the same time prepared her for her fieldwork that will commence in October 2022.

Remote teambuilding and online communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

Before starting this research project, I had already conducted fieldwork with graduate students at FU Berlin, but mainly for the purpose of method training. Together with students I have conducted interviews and participant observation as part of a method course with a focus on Berlin's Japanese foodscape since 2015 (Reiher 2018). At the end of each course, students would write their own report or create a video about their findings in small groups and I would write up my results in individual papers. For the project on urban-rural migration, however, close cooperation with the research assistants is necessary as we are all part of a research group that is expected to produce publications within the next few years. As the research design of this project requires comparison, all the team members' data are indispensable for the final publication. Therefore, building trust and a working environment in which team members can rely on each other is vital.

However, the pandemic made this very difficult, as we had to build a team remotely. We regularly met for video conferences with our student assistant and other PhD students at FU Berlin who work on rural Japan. We started reading and discussing the most recent publications on urban-rural migration and rural Japan, created a shared bibliography, defined and discussed

terms that appear in our individual research projects and presented our progress to each other. Frank introduced a different policy scheme from Japan's national government's Regional Revitalisation Comprehensive Strategy every week and Cecilia introduced debates on and beyond the urban-rural dichotomy. This approach enabled the group to identify tasks that could be done while in Berlin and created shared knowledge about rural Japan from different disciplinary perspectives. We also got to know each other better, although I believe that nothing can make up for the shared meals and discussions in hallways that we had to forgo because of the COVID-19 situation. The regular meetings, however, helped us to stay engaged and excited about our joint research project and sustained our hope that we would be able to conduct fieldwork in Japan in the near future.

In March 2021 we started a study group and launched a blog.[1] In the study group's biweekly meetings, team members and guests presented their work. What had started out as a group of five people developed into a constantly growing international and interdisciplinary group of students and scholars from Europe and Asia who share an interest in rural Japan. In the winter of 2021 we launched a lecture series. Colleagues and students presented their research, and we discovered interesting parallels and connections between the various projects discussing urban-rural migration and rural issues in and beyond Japan. In summer 2022 we experimented with different formats, including workshop-style discussion groups on topics like housing and digitalisation. Despite the pandemic, we also presented our work at (online) conferences, both individually and as a team. We also organised joint study groups with scholars and students from Kyūshū University where Frank and Cecilia presented their research in Japanese, and we had very interesting discussions with our Japanese colleagues. In 2022 we also met online with members of the Aso Project at the University of Vienna to exchange experiences related to research about rural Kyūshū.

In addition to the study group, the blog enabled us to share first insights from our online fieldwork and to connect with other researchers and practitioners in Europe and Asia. It became an important venue to channel our thoughts and to present our experiences and initial results. By doing so, we also reached out to other researchers and students, whom we invited to write about their own research on rural Japan, urban-rural migration and methodological challenges during the pandemic. Because we could not go to Japan ourselves, we asked some of our research participants to write about the sit-

1 See https://userblogs.fu-berlin.de/urban-rural-migration-japan/

uation in rural Japan, their lives and their rural revitalisation activities. The blog also played an important role when reaching out to research participants, who could look at the blog to learn about our research project and team. Our network expanded faster than we expected, and we were able to publish one blogpost a week. Surprisingly, we were contacted by people who found our blog online and some of them later became authors, collaborators and research participants. Motivated by this experience, we created an Instagram account to reach even more people. We also used the blog to share information about our online events and lectures and in 2022 I used it as a resource for teaching undergraduate students about Japan's rural areas.

Both the study group and the blog served as means to get to know each other and helped to raise our team spirit during the long periods when we could not meet in person. Working together on the short blog posts, sharing feedback and reading other people's posts helped us to feel closer as a team. But most of all, meeting with the other team members in Berlin in person and discovering new things about rural areas together was crucial for team building. In April 2022 we went on a fieldtrip to Brandenburg to talk to German urban-rural migrants in our vicinity. As well as providing a useful perspective for our research in Japan, it was also a wonderful opportunity to spend time together as a team. My research assistants took over the tasks of organising the study group and peer reviewing their blog posts before sending them to me for a final edit. We also started to write papers together. Assigning these tasks and responsibilities to the research assistants relieved the pressure on me as a team leader and increased their sense of responsibility for the project while providing them with new professional and intellectual experiences.

Managing a team with international PhD students at a German university

However, collaboration in academic settings invariably gives rise to various difficulties. In this case, the main challenge was to negotiate each team member's role within the research project and translate the differences between the German academic system and the academic systems in which my research assistants had been educated. I soon discovered that I had underestimated the scale of this challenge.

When Frank and Cecilia arrived, I encouraged them to affiliate with the Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS) in order to meet other PhD students involved with East Asia and participate in courses. As I teach courses at GEAS, I assumed that this would benefit my assistants intellectually and

methodologically. The doctoral programme at GEAS also sets milestones for PhD students that include the submission of a literature review and an extended project proposal with a fieldwork plan after the first year. I thought that these milestones would help them become familiar with relevant scholarly debates, shape and position their own research project within these debates and get ready for fieldwork. In addition, affiliation at GEAS would provide them with access to courses that offer professional training and "soft skills." After completing parts of the doctoral programme at GEAS they would receive a certificate that might help them to apply for jobs after our project funding ends.

Their double affiliation as both PhD students in a structured doctoral programme and as research assistants in the project as regular university employees, however, created confusion regarding their responsibilities and the balance between their individual PhD research, course work, individual career development and work for our joint project. Both research assistants were unfamiliar with the trajectory for gaining a PhD degree in Germany and assumed that their task was simply to write their PhD thesis. Affiliation with the graduate school nurtured this assumption because they met PhD students on scholarships who were able to devote all their time to their PhD thesis. Although I had tried at the outset to explain their position, it still came as a surprise and at times caused confusion when they realised that their responsibilities differed from those of their peers who did not have to submit time sheets, consult regularly with team members and fulfil tasks for a project in addition to their individual research.

The challenge was and still is negotiating and balancing their roles in a way that both benefits the project and meets their individual aspirations for finishing a PhD thesis within three years. While most PhD students in our field decide on a research topic themselves and conduct independent research, working in a research team with a pre-set goal and research design requires constant negotiations about the content of the individual PhD project and how to best connect it with the project's goals. It also demands close consultations about interview questionnaires, research participants and topics to enable comparison across cases. Frank and Cecilia have less freedom to follow their own research interests and also bear the extra burden of organising research group meetings and writing joint papers with me in addition to writing their PhD thesis. But fortunately they appear to view their situation positively and feel that it has given them clearer direction for their research and helped to clarify where their PhD project was going.

Another challenge was related to language and translation in the literal sense. Due to the pandemic, most of the university's administrative staff worked from home. Although both research assistants had previously studied German, approaching people in a new workplace in a foreign language can be quite difficult and even more so if the only chance to contact them is via the telephone. Although I had planned more project-related responsibilities and activities for the research assistants, such as organising a conference, this proved to be impossible as it is very difficult for non-German speakers to navigate the administrative system at a German university where German is the dominant language required for getting help and support for organisational matters. Thus, I had to make the decision to either assign my research assistants' valuable time to finding out how the system worked or let them get on with their research. I chose the latter, which although placing a greater burden on me will hopefully enable Frank and Cecilia to finish their PhD theses within the already relatively short time span of three years.

The limited funding for PhD research is yet another structural problem related to the academic system in Germany that complicates working with PhD students in a joint research project. Finishing a PhD thesis within three years is an ambitious timescale if fieldwork is involved. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates this problem and places tremendous pressure on young researchers. This often forces them to think about their own careers and finishing their thesis rather than about their obligations to the research project they are working on. Although we cannot solve these problems in the short term, we can at least communicate openly and address them within the team. The negotiation of roles and responsibilities, therefore, is an ongoing process that will undoubtedly continue until the very end of this project.

Conclusion: The benefits of collaboration

Despite the uncertainties created by the pandemic, Japan's entry ban, and the constant negotiation of roles within the research project, our collaboration extended beyond our individual projects, the study group and the blog. For our first joint paper we analysed promotional videos for prospective in-migrants issued by the four prefectures we are studying, investigated their support schemes for in-migrants and interviewed prefectural government officials about their activities to attract in-migrants. As a team we divided up tasks. Cecilia analysed the videos of two prefectures, while Frank summarised the four prefectures' plans related to the comprehensive strategy and interviewed officials from two prefectures. Both investigated the support

schemes of two prefectures, while I analysed the videos and support schemes of the remaining two prefectures, interviewed prefectural government officials and created the overarching concept for the paper. We all read secondary literature and wrote different sections of the paper.

Due to this collective effort, we were able to analyse much more data than one person working on their own, which allowed for an interesting comparison of the four prefectures' promotional strategies to attract in-migrants. We found that the support for in-migrants is quite similar in all four prefectures and includes financial support for families and entrepreneurs, and information about available jobs and available housing (*akiya banku*). We also found that the four prefectures, rather than presenting the countryside and rural lifestyle as innovative, experimental and open, use their promotional videos to represent rural Japan in a traditional way as a "rural idyll", thereby tapping into older discourses about rurality and *furusato* from the realm of tourism, consumption and the media. However, the videos show a change in values regarding work and family already noted by other authors (Klien 2019, 2020; Nakagawa 2018; Rosenberger 2017): All migrants who appeared in the videos wanted a better work-life balance and more time with their families, even though not all of them had been able to realise their aspirations. This comparative perspective allowed us to note a difference between the prefectures' representation of the countryside and the actual practices and imaginaries of urban-rural migrants we interviewed online. This was only possible because we worked as a team.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic and Japan's travel ban, however unfortunate and problematic, enabled mutual learning and cooperation, new methodological approaches, perspectives and experiences. Without being forced to do so, it is highly unlikely that I would have thought about social media research and thus would have missed an important part of people's everyday lives and the ways they represent themselves, their businesses, their communities, and rural Japan online. From my research assistants I learned about social media and how to create an online persona for reaching out to research participants. I also learned that it is possible to contact high-ranking government officials via social media to arrange interviews. As a team, we are able to systematically compare experiences of urban-rural migrants in different municipalities with their respective support schemes, policies and revitalisation efforts to find patterns and structures that go beyond the many case studies about urban-rural migration that already exist. Even though some

problems are ongoing, we discuss our research and any difficulties on a regular basis and hope to present findings from our project in the near future.

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