CECILIA LUZI

Adapting schedules and learning to collaborate:
Reflections on a PhD experience in a group project during the pandemic

When I moved to Berlin to join the research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan" as a research assistant in late September 2020, I did not really know how a group project would work. I had lived, worked and studied in Paris for the previous ten years and in Tōkyō for one year just before the COVID-19 outbreak. Everything ahead was new to me. This was my first experience of team research after years spent studying for my degrees. I was not sure how independent research within a group project was supposed to be conducted or how I would contribute to the work of other team members. However, I was excited to embark on this new journey, despite the uncertainties created by the ongoing pandemic. In addition, my unplanned pregnancy forced me to rearrange my personal schedule within the main framework of the project. These circumstances pushed me to find new paths for being creative and effective, both in my research and the way I worked with the team. Almost two years after commencing the research, this paper reflects on my experience of conducting a PhD within the project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and directed by Cornelia Reiher at Freie Universität Berlin.

In the first section I will introduce my own PhD project about urban-rural migrants in rural Kyūshū and outline the adjustments I had to make during the first year of my studies. I will then focus on my contribution to the group project and follow on with a discussion of teamwork. Finally, I will consider the impact of COVID-19 on the group project.

My PhD project and how it evolved

During the first months of 2022 at the beginning of my second year of doctoral work, I undertook an extensive revision of my PhD project due to the fact that it was impossible to conduct onsite fieldwork as I had originally planned.

My previous research was built on long-term ethnographic fieldwork, yet the pandemic forced me to reconsider not only my methods but also my research questions. Rewriting a doctoral project one year after starting research is a daunting task in itself. In my case, I also had to find a way of aligning it with the group project while trying to make my research accessible to my fellow PhD researcher and the project supervisor. In this section, I will first introduce my current research project and then explain how I readjusted the original project to accommodate these new circumstances.

Building a new home: Urban-rural migrants in rural Kyūshū

We are used to thinking of internal migratory flows in contemporary societies as movements of individuals and groups towards urban areas. Recently, however, a reverse movement pushing educated people out of the metropolis is gaining momentum in many post-industrial capitalist countries (Dolci / Perrin 2017; Gross 2009; Jacob 1997; Wilbur 2014). This is also the case in Japan, which, after having faced a long and profound process of rural deindustrialisation and depopulation over several decades, is now experiencing a growth in the number of people relocating to rural areas (Klien 2020; Muramatsu 2017; Odagiri 2015).

In Japan, scholars have investigated the effect on the migratory movement of political governance at the local and national level (Klien 2020, 90; Reiher 2020; Hatayama 2016). The growing body of literature on urban-rural migration in Japan has also focused attention on the way national metropolitan centres—mainly Tōkyō and Ōsaka—and local peripheral areas relate to each other. This tension informs and shapes patterns of rural resettlement (Reiher 2020; Hatayama 2016; Odagiri et al. 2015). Additionally, the growing literature documenting the phenomenon has mainly focused on migrants' personal reasons for moving from cities, with individual experiences of relocation being widely investigated and discussed by social scientists, including anthropologists and sociologists (Klien 2019, 2020; Takeda 2020; Obikwelu et al. 2017; Rosenberger 2014, 2017; Odagiri et al. 2015). While recent literature on urban-rural migration in Japan has highlighted the precarity and instability of the residency of internal migrants (see Klien 2020, 2021), the aim of my project is to reflect on the role that the quest for stability and belonging may have in their experiences (Ralph / Staheli 2011; Mallet 2004).

My research questions originally developed from the reflection that internal migration, like international migration, can be as much about pursuing mobility as a lifestyle as it is about finding a new home and settling down. During the fieldwork I conducted for my master's thesis in a commu-

nity of in-migrants in Wakayama prefecture, however, I started to reconsider this focus on mobility. I had the impression that the practices I witnessed in Wakayama of renovating old houses, participating in local cultural and political events and building small businesses from scratch, as well as discourses about building a better future for children and living true to oneself, suggested a different story than that of relentlessly mobile generations. This led me to focus on how the experience of migration towards rural areas in Japan is related to the process of searching for an ideal home. It is important to "examine the ways in which migrants continue to 'ground' their lives in multiple locations and to consider how home is already inflected with mobility—and conversely, with the ways mobility is inflected with gestures of attachment" (Ralph / Staheli 2011, 519). In order to conduct my research, I will collect the life stories of individuals with multiple experiences of migration throughout their lives in an attempt to understand the ways in which this relationship between mobility and attachment evolves over the course of a migrant's life. Thus the aim of this project is to contribute to the debates around the conceptualisation of home in anthropology, sociology and human geography, as well as to the literature discussing urban-rural migration in Japan.

Redesigning a PhD project against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic

As stated above, this research is the product of an extensive revision of my initial PhD project undertaken during the first months of 2022. The aim of my initial project was to examine the evolution of everyday life in rural areas in Hasami and Buzen, two municipalities in Nagasaki and Fukuoka prefectures, making use of two different ethnographic approaches: relational ethnography (Desmond 2014) and multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Falzon 2009; Candea 2007). The project aimed to investigate encounters between three groups of actors in the rural space, namely urban migrants, local residents and local authorities, in order to explore how rural communities envisioned discourses and engaged in practices of "rural revitalisation" in Japan. At this time, I had already started to conduct digital research in Berlin, but all the while viewed it as preparation for my fieldwork. As a young anthropologist starting my PhD, all my research questions presumed the possibility of ethnographic fieldwork and so finally renouncing the ethnographic part of my project was a hard decision to take.

Forced to redesign an anthropology project that could also be conducted away from the field, I had to find a group of actors for my research who were digitally accessible from Berlin, formulate new research questions and

define a new methodology that did not solely rely on the physical presence of the researcher in the field. The first part of this task was relatively straightforward, as I realised that the presence of in-migrants on various digital platforms would make them easily accessible research participants.

To find inspiration and formulate new research questions, I went back to the data collected during my master's fieldwork between 2018 and 2019. Looking at the data from a different perspective, I began to think that although the theoretical framework of mobility explains some important features of internal migration to rural areas in Japan, contemporary analyses tend to overlook one important aspect: the efforts made by in-migrants to settle down and establish a new home. At that point, I began to dive into the relatively recent literature linking homing processes to international migration experiences (see Boccagni 2017).

Finally, while reflecting on a methodology that could be adapted to digital research, I decided to conduct extended semi-structured interviews and collect life stories to reconstruct migrants' individual trajectories. Although talking about "home" and migration is not a sensitive topic, at the same time it carries an emotional and sentimental load that facilitates exchange, even via a computer screen. Individuals I interview online are always happy to talk about their lives from this perspective and I often receive positive feedback as well as agreement for one or even more follow-up conversations. Collecting narratives about migration and adaptation to a new place can be a powerful tool for investigating the evolution of the idea of "home". Moreover, the idea of engaging in a prolonged exchange with research participants and establishing personal relationships online revived my enthusiasm for the PhD project, which had waned considerably after having to abandon all hope of a long period of fieldwork a year and a half after the start of the pandemic. This allowed me to maintain my focus on Hasami and Buzen and to use a hybrid research design that combined online interviews and digital ethnography with classic fieldwork.

Contribution to the group project

When thinking of a new design for my PhD project, I always kept the DFG team research in mind and did my best to consider the needs of the other project members. The other PhD student on the project, my supervisor (also the project leader) and the student assistant all had no hesitation in encouraging me to go ahead with the new idea when I first spoke to them about it. To make sure I was attuned to the goals of the DFG project, I constantly went back to

its objectives while thinking about the new research design for my work. The objectives of the DFG project are to study the impact of migratory flows on rural revitalisation and see how they challenge the original social structure, redefine the relation between centre and periphery and ultimately reconfigure Japanese rural space. My contribution is to explore how migrants interact with rural space and the people who live and work there in order to show how the "rural"—as opposed to the "urban"—defines the possibility of home. Individual narratives will help me understand these dynamics and in particular enable me to show how the place where urban-rural migrants choose to live is where it is possible for them to realise their ideal home.

Collaboration and interaction with the other PhD student in the project and my supervisor became more frequent once data collection commenced. My fellow PhD student was in Japan when I started to conduct online interviews in Berlin, but we exchanged constant updates to coordinate our communication strategies. With the project supervisor, I discussed the topics to be covered during the interviews and the type of information I would need to obtain from the field once on site. In addition to collecting supplementary information to complete the life stories for my PhD work, the data gathered from fieldwork will represent an important part of my contribution to the overall project. The analysis of conflicts arising from political interactions on a local scale is an important objective of the research, and once in Buzen and Hasami I will have easier access to local residents to investigate how they become embedded in the practices and discourses of rural revitalisation. Also, the comparative approach between two municipalities and the simultaneous study of migration occurring both within and outside government structures of support will help me understand how both locals and newcomers react to revitalisation policies and how different social, economic and political landscapes of the countryside are redefined by the influx of an urban population.

The most challenging part of data collection in the field will be making the information I have gathered accessible to my colleague and my supervisor. Being the last to leave for fieldwork, I will greatly benefit from the work that my colleagues have already carried out. This is true with regard to my ethnographic work, the strategies to be used in the field, the contacts that have already been made and also in the way that data is organised so that it can be used by others. I am planning to share the most interesting parts of my fieldnotes and send any other observations that may be useful to the team members in the form of monthly updates. I will also make the transcription of my interviews accessible to the whole team. However, ethnography is a

complex methodology that relies heavily on serendipity and, for this reason, I will have to be particularly careful to note down every detail as new paths for investigation can emerge from any encounter.

Carrying out my project while at the same time contributing to group research has undoubtedly proved to be the most difficult part of teamwork for me. The experience of the past two years has shown me that team members engage in a continuous process of learning to work and cooperate by finding compromises. In order for the project to be successfully completed, each member has to take care of their own work while at the same time adhering to the group's schedule. This requires flexibility and good cooperation skills. In our case, the pandemic meant that from the very beginning in October 2020 we had to readjust the schedule proposed by our project leader and also had to redesign some parts of the project as we went along, which took away time from the actual research.

Teamwork

When the DFG project started in October 2020, the four team members—myself, our supervisor, my PhD colleague and the student assistant—already knew that the general organisation of the research would require some adjustments. For my part, it was clear from the outset that I would have to postpone my fieldwork as I was taking maternity leave from the following semester. However, none of us could have anticipated the multiple rescheduling and the frustration that resulted from the entry ban imposed by the Japanese government throughout 2021 to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first semester in the project was spent building the team and establishing common ground to create a frame of reference for the project. We also set up an open discussion group with other PhD students from the Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS). After a few meetings, we soon realised that this study group was an excellent opportunity for exchange and networking during a pandemic, so we agreed on opening the study group to other students and researchers around the world. Eventually, it became an extremely useful tool for developing a research network, receiving feedback and discovering potential research paths.

I left the team in February 2021 to give birth to my son, but my maternity leave did not significantly impact the team schedule as it had already been thrown into disarray by Japan's prolonged entry ban. When I returned to work in September, my colleague and my supervisor had their documents ready to leave for fieldwork, but they were again forced to reschedule their

departure. As a result, we resumed our teamwork thinking about new strategies for each of us and for the whole project. I began the application process for my own visa so that I would be ready to leave as soon as the entry ban was lifted. With the help of my supervisor, I applied for a visiting research position at Kyūshū University in Fukuoka, prepared all the documents for the visa request and organised the dispatch application from Freie Universität Berlin.

During these past two years, with the help of our student assistant we also created a blog related to our project, which has been our door to the outside world and the tool that has kept us connected with the community of researchers on rural Japan and beyond. Writing in a blog proved to be an exercise in positionality. Putting observations and thoughts out for a wider, more diversified audience forced me to spend time reflecting on what parts of my research I wanted people to read and how to convey relevant insights in less than 800 words.

To sum up, doing a PhD while working as a research assistant in a group project has been an opportunity to learn from the skills and abilities of others and has also taught me how to adapt my own pace and goals to those of the group. Interdisciplinary collaboration with colleagues from different backgrounds has enriched my approach and has shown me the benefits of intellectual exchange. I am learning to switch perspective and think in creative ways whenever I have difficulty adapting my work to the overall project objectives. At the same time, the sharing of data and points of view gives me food for thought for my research and broadens my knowledge of the field. These, however, are not the only benefits of working in a team. What I have treasured the most is the potential it provides for building a network of solid relationships and being part of a group for mutual support. This support has helped me face the difficulties brought about by the pandemic, especially in terms of motivation. Exchanging ideas and encouraging each other has always helped revive our initial enthusiasm and reminded us of our common goals in the project.

The impact of COVID-19: Negative and positive side effects of the pandemic

Our project began in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had an undeniable impact on both the design of our research and the organisation of our teamwork. On the positive side, the exceptional circumstances drove us to take certain courses of action that ultimately strengthened the spirit of collaboration in our group. While discussing how to overcome bureaucratic

obstacles and adapt our research strategies, we were able to help each other overcome difficulties and stay afloat. Adapting to unprecedented working conditions and developing new methodologies also led us to discover new aspects of the field. We realised that the online space can be an excellent place to collect data and, even more importantly, we observed how the digital sphere is a crucial arena for many actors living and working in contemporary rural Japan.

After a couple of months of online research for my subproject, it became clear that for many migrants their presence in the digital space is much more than for purposes of entertainment and a relic of their "urban" habit of communication. Many of them are entrepreneurs for whom social media represent an irreplaceable platform of exchange and communication for keeping their business activity alive. Observing the great effort in terms of time and skill that some migrants put into their visible online presence pushed me to consider the importance of the complementarity of offline and online spaces (Przybylski 2020). This is an aspect I would never have grasped had I not been forced to work from my desk for an extended period before leaving for fieldwork.

Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on our work. The Japanese government's extended entry ban disrupted our schedule and forced us to repeatedly change our fieldwork plans. Initially, we had to abandon our plans for a preliminary trip, and later we also had to drop the idea of conducting joint fieldwork. This rescheduling and changing of plans meant that more time had to be spent on completing burdensome bureaucratic procedures. In my case, this was accompanied by the intense stress of juggling my plans for long-term fieldwork with my family, the youngest member having been born in spring 2021. The repeated cancellations and deferments accentuated the precariousness of our situation and the pressure inevitably impacted my work and my contribution to the project. As for my PhD project, I realised that if I wanted to submit my thesis in time, I would have to start writing some parts while still in the field.

Conclusion

Research in a team project is certainly different from working on one's own. It is not only the rhythm that changes but also the way that one conducts research. For me, the most difficult part of working in a team has been balancing my contribution to the group project with the work for my own research. During these past two years, I have realised that negotiating the roles of be-

ing a PhD student and a research assistant is an ongoing process that requires constant adjustments and compromises. After understanding the goal of the project, I had to learn how to contribute to it while at the same time building the design for my own research. This is not a straightforward process, and at times I still feel disoriented. The comparative dimension of the research helps me understand my role and contribution, as I am responsible for two municipalities that are distinct from those of the project leader's research, and I also have a different disciplinary background from my fellow PhD colleague. However, gathering anthropological data in a way that is potentially useful for others to build their own analysis is still a daunting task. Additionally, the digital turn I had to take in order to continue my research during the pandemic forced me to adopt methodological solutions that are more often creative attempts rather than structured strategies that I can successfully share with others.

On the other hand, the team project has pushed me out of my comfort zone and taught me how to see my research from the perspective of different disciplines and, more importantly, of other team members. Also, throughout the whole process of redesigning my personal project, the encouragement of my colleagues has played a paramount role. After some initial hesitancy, I started to conduct online interviews in April 2022 along with the digital ethnography. There is extensive literature discussing digital methods and online research (Beaulieu 2004; Pink et al. 2016; Przybylski 2020; Varis 2016), yet I found the most valuable guide was not so much in manuals as in the exchange and constant dialogue with others similarly "on the ground" of digital ethnography, who are experimenting to find creative ways of conducting online research. Being the last one in my team to engage in the data gathering process, I was also able to benefit from the experience of my colleagues and their support was particularly important during the initial period of my online interviews.

In conclusion, conducting research in a team has been an intense experience, in which my greatest challenge has been to negotiate my contribution and understand the place of my research within the project as a whole. However, I believe that the constant exchange between team members and sharing a regular work rhythm with them throughout the long months of the pandemic helped to keep my enthusiasm for the project alive and motivated me to continue despite the many challenges.

References

Beaulieu, Anne. 2004. "Mediating ethnography: Objectivity and the making of ethnographies of the internet." *Social Epistemology* 18, no. 2-3: 139–163.

Boccagni, Paolo. 2017. *Migration and the search for home: Mapping domestic space in migrants' everyday lives*. New York: Palgrave.

Candea, Matei. 2007. "Arbitrary locations: In defence of the bounded field-site." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 1: 167–184.

Desmond, Matthew. 2014. "Relational ethnography." *Theory and Society* 43, no. 5: 547–579.

Dolci, Paula / Perrin, Coline. 2017. "Retourner à la terre en Sardaigne, crises et installations en agriculture." T*racés. Revue de Sciences humaines* 33: 145–167.

Falzon, Mark-Anthony. 2009. "Introduction: Multi-sited ethnography: Theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research." In *Multi-sited ethnography: Theory, praxis and locality in contemporary research*, edited by Mark-Anthony Falzon, 1–23. New York: Routledge.

Gross, Joan. 2009. "Capitalism and its discontents: Back-to-the-lander and freegan foodways in rural Oregon." *Food and Foodways* 17, no. 2: 57–79.

Hatayama, Naoko 畑山直子. 2016. "Ijūsha o chiiki to tsunagu no wa dare ka? Chichibu akiya banku ni okeru minkan kigyō to jichitai no renkei"「移住者」を地域とつなぐのは誰か -ちちぶ空き家バンクにおける民間企業と自治体の連携 [Who connects migrants with the rural areas? The collaboration of the municipality and private enterprises through Chichibu's database for vacant houses]. *Nihon toshi shakaigaku nenpō* 日本都市学会年報 [Annual Report of the Urban Society of Japan] 49: 137–145.

Jacob, Jeffrey. 1997. *New pioneers: The back-to-the-land movement and the search for a sustainable future*. University Park: Penn State Press.

Klien, Susanne. 2019. "Entrepreneurial selves, governmentality and lifestyle migrants in rural Japan." *Asian Anthropology* 18, no. 2: 75–90.

Klien, Susanne. 2020. *Urban migrants in rural Japan: Between agency and anomie in a post-growth society*. Albany: Suny Press.

Mallett, Shelley. 2004. "Understanding home: a critical review of the literature." *The Sociological Review* 52, no. 1: 62–89.

Marcus, George E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, no. 1: 95–117.

Muramatsu, Kenjirō 村松研二郎. 2017. "Nihon ni okeru kinōundō no rekishi to genzai: keifuronteki shiron" 日本における帰農運動の歴史と現在―系譜論的試論 [History and actuality of the back-to-the-land movements in Japan: Towards a genealogical analysis]. In *Kokusai nihongaku* 国際日本学第14号 [International Japanese Studies No. XIV], edited by Hōsei daigaku kokusai nihongaku kenkyūjo 法政大学国際日本学研究所 [Center for International Japan Studies, Hōsei University, Japan], 167–192. Tōkyō: Hōsei daigaku kokusai nihongaku kenkyūjo.

Obikwelu, Faith E. / Ikegami, Koichi / Tsuruta, Tadasu eds. 2017. "Factors of urban-rural migration and socio-economic condition of I-turn migrants in rural Japan." *Journal of Asian Rural Studies* 1, no. 1: 70–80.

Odagiri, Tokumi 小田切徳美 / Hirai, Tarō 平井太郎 / Shiikawa Shinobu 椎川忍 eds. 2015. *Chiikiokoshi kyōryokutai: Nihon o genki ni suru 60-nin no chōsen* 地域おこし協力隊 日本を元気にする60人の挑戦 [Community-building support programme: The challenge of 60 people to revitalise Japan]. Tōkyō: Gakugei Shuppan 学芸出版社.

Odagiri, Tokumi 小田切徳美. 2015 "Tayō-na wakamono to tayō-na nōsan gyoson o tsunagu chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai." 多様な若者と多様な農山漁村をつなぐ地域おこし協力隊 [Community-building support programme connecting diverse youth with diverse farming and fishing villages]. In *Chiikiokoshi kyōryokutai : Nihon o genki ni suru 60-nin no chōsen* 地域おこし協力隊 日本を元気にする60人の挑戦　[Community-building support programme: The challenge of 60 people to revitalise Japan], edited by Tokumi Odagiri / Tarō Hirai / Shinobu Shiikawa, 23–37. Tōkyō: Gakugei Shuppan 学芸出版社.

Pink, Sarah / Horst, Heather / Postill, John / Hjorth, Larissa / Lewis, Tania / Tacchi, Jo eds. 2016. *Digital ethnography: Principles and practice*. London: SAGE.

Przybylski, Liz. 2020. *Hybrid ethnography: Online, offline, and in between*. Thousand Oaks / London / New Delhi / Singapore: SAGE Publications.

Ralph, David / Staeheli, Lynn A. 2011. "Home and migration: Mobilities, belongings and identities." *Geography Compass* 5, no. 7: 517–530.

Reiher, Cornelia. 2020. "Embracing the periphery: Urbanites' motivations to relocate to rural Japan." In *Japan's new ruralities: Coping with decline in the periphery,* edited by Wolfram Manzenreiter / Ralph Lützeler / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 230–244. London: Routledge.

Rosenberger, Nancy. 2014. "'Making an ant's forehead of difference': Organic agriculture as an alternative lifestyle in Japan." In *Capturing contemporary Japan: Differentiation and uncertainty*, edited by Satsuki Kawano, et al., 105–134. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Rosenberger, Nancy. 2017. "Young organic farmers in Japan: Betting on lifestyle, locality, and livelihood." *Contemporary Japan* 29, no. 1: 14–30.

Takeda, Shunsuke. 2020. "Fluidity in rural Japan." In *Japan's new ruralities: Coping with decline in the periphery*, edited by Wolfram Manzenreiter / Ralph Lützeler / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 196–211. London: Routledge.

Varis, Piia. 2016. "Digital ethnography." In *The Routledge handbook of language and digital communication*, edited by Alexandra Georgakopoulou / Tereza Spilioti, 55–68. London: Routledge.

Wilbur, Andrew. 2014. "Back-to-the-house? Gender, domesticity and (dis) empowerment among back-to-the-land migrants in Northern Italy." *Journal of Rural Studies* 35: 1–10.