Cosmopolitan rurality and changing life in rural Japan—A discussion with John W. Traphagan and Sebastian Polak-Rottmann

During a seminar class held at the University of Vienna (Austria) amidst the COVID-19-pandemic in 2021, students of the Department of East Asian Studies invited scholars of Japanese studies to talk with them about their recent publications. Sebastian Polak-Rottmann (German Institute for Japanese Studies), back then PhD student, talked with Prof. John W. Traphagan (The University of Texas, Austin) about his book *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in 21st-Century Japan* (2020, Cambria Press). After briefly reviewing the monograph, Polak-Rottmann started a lively discussion with Traphagan, which can be read below.

SPR   Having read and introduced your book, some questions came to my mind that I would like to discuss with you. First however, I would like to know, what made you decide to write a book about cosmopolitan rurality.

JWT   Thank you for that introduction of the book. Why did I do this? The main reason I got interested in this is because it has to do with the long-term fieldwork. I have been going to the same place since 1988, and I think when you keep going back to the same place to do your research, you notice all the consistencies and the change over time. And I will add that in my case it's a little bit deeper. Because my dissertation advisor, Keith Brown, started doing work in the same place in 1961. So, we've spent over the years a great deal of time talking about, you know, what are the changes, what are things that seem consistent. And the other thing that I think stimulated this, was, when you are doing ethnographic research there is a way that you always wind up sort of comparing the place with the place that you're from. Whether you are doing it consciously or not, it's in your head. And I don't think "rural" in Japan is the same thing as "rural" in the United States. And that's always intrigued me. You know, I live in Texas. You can't find in Japan what I can find an hour from Austin. If I drive west for an hour or maybe at most two hours, Texas is big so it takes eight hours to drive across the state, but I'll be in the middle of a desert, where there is nothing. Japan just isn't like that. That kind

of rurality doesn't exist in Japan. The interconnectedness of all parts of Japan through rail, elevated highways and of course telecommunication really led me to think that the concept of rurality isn't very meaningful in the Japanese context, at least as an analytical category. It is valuable in terms of how people themselves think about where they live. But, as something that we take and use to look at different parts of the world, I just think about my experiences there and about what it's like where I live. I concluded that that wasn't a very good way to conceptualize things. I wanted to go and really think through that and for me the best way to do that was to work the case studies I had. I have a lot more interviews than what's actually in the book and originally the project started as a completely different project. When I started, I was interested in female entrepreneurs in rural and urban Japan. I wanted to look at both. And I have a whole body of interviews from Hiroshima and Tōkyō that never show up in the book, because the project went into the direction it went in. But that was the original aim. As I got into the data, I realized, "No, I've got a whole book here on just trying to make sense out of rurality and can do that with the case studies." That's in essence how I wound up doing it.

SPR   You just told us that your supervisor also went to the region and did his research there. When you talk to him and compare the 1960s with the late 1980s or today, what has changed the most.

JWT   Probably there are two things I can think of right off the top of my head. One is mechanization. When he started going there in early 1960, rice was still largely planted by hand, you have the images of rows of people bending over putting the rice plants in the paddies. All of that is done with machines now. And one of the things that it means is that agriculture is not as labor intensive in the way that it was 60 years ago. The other thing that is connected to that and it's interesting because it is more like an arch rather than a line. The use of pesticides and various kinds of chemicals in the rice fields in particular, grew rapidly over the past 60 years to the point that, for example, there used to be fish in rice paddies and they all died. But they have now reduced that significantly. There are a lot of people interested in organic farming and reducing chemicals used and the fish are coming back. There is a big white bird (Great Eastern Egret) that you never used to see and now I routinely see it when I'm driving around in the rice paddies. So, I think what has changed rather significantly is that the conceptualization of the environment is different now from what it was. And it's gone to kind of an arch in relation to that. And of course, following Fukushima you've seen a

rather dramatic increase in things like solar panels. So, there's a changing attitude. The other big thing is the demographics. You just can't escape it there. You know, just the other day I was looking something up for an article, and the population of the hamlet where I initially did my dissertation research has gone from 429 people to 225 people in 20 years. That's an astonishing change in a very short period of time. And this is what is happening all throughout that area and throughout many parts of rural Japan. There are empty houses everywhere you go. It's just incredible. It wasn't like that when I first started going there. But you can't go anywhere without seeing empty buildings. Go for a walk and you'll run across lots of old faces. Very, very few children. I would go there every summer and my kids would go to an elementary school. That elementary school was designed for about 220 people and the last time, this is a few years ago, that my daughter was in that school, there were 60 students in that school. And so, as you move around you recognize that the demographic pressures are one of the things that is stimulating a need to reconfigure what's going on. They don't really have much choice, they've got to figure out how to survive in a very different demographic environment. I will say too that I agree with Bill Kelly's comment that often the demographic changes are presented as decline, collapse and everything is presented that way. And that is going on. But at the same time this is also perceived and being responded to as an opportunity for creativity and invention. So, it is not like a unidirectional thing that is going on. Actually, one of the more interesting aspects of this is that you have a pressure where they are losing population, the economy is struggling and all sorts of things and a kind of counterpressure to say, "Alright, that's happening. What will we do to reconfigure our world so that we can live here and that our economy works?" I will say that many people are not very hopeful about this working. One of the people I talked to, the woman who runs the pharmacy discussed in the book, she's told me that she thinks they've got maybe 15 years left that they can keep the business running. Because there are so many old people, but when the population kind of tanks in terms of that population, they just won't be able to keep the business going the way it's been operating. That's going to be a real problem.

SPR Thanks for that. I have many points that caught my interest at that point. For example, you just mentioned change not only in terms of decline but also as an opportunity. So, in what ways can we conceive this opportunity? Are your case studies examples for this creativity that arose because of these demographic changes in the first place or do we have to think of other things as well that are probably bigger than that?

JWT I would say yes to both questions, actually. Well I think the case studies are complicated in the sense that I've been interested really since the early 2000s in return migrants to rural Japan. You know, you've got a long-standing pattern of people who move to Tōkyō in particular, but they might move to another city, but Tōkyō is the big pull. They stay there for several years and then some of them return home. And there are a lot of different reasons why they return home. So, I've always been interested in that and on the one hand I think there is a draw to rural regions that is related to becoming disillusioned with urban life in a big city like Tōkyō. It's fast, it's tiring, it's, you know, the kinds of interconnections that people have are not the same types that they have in an area like Kanegasaki where I go. The woman who runs the gelato shop told me that that was a big impetus for her to move back. She often talks about how she likes the slower pace of life, which is a bit ironic because her life is not slow paced. When it's busy season she gets up at 2 o'clock every morning to make gelato and cheese and goes to bed at 11 o'clock at night. She sleeps three or four hours a night. So, it's not a slow pace for her in terms of keeping her business going, but the pace and quality of social interactions is different from the city. And the interconnections among people. It's a different kind of set of interconnections. So, I think in many cases people are being driven because they want that lifestyle. It may be romanticized; it may not be real. But at least they want that lifestyle they perceive to be there. On the other hand, you have an internal pull coming from these areas, because they're desperately trying to figure out how to get people to come to start businesses. So, they have a lot of programs that are designed to do that. A lot of times the programs don't work. If nobody wants to move there, it doesn't matter how many programs you have and so I see a set of pushes and pulls that are going on related to this. The other thing is of course that what we're doing right now is an example of how dramatically things have changed. When I started my fieldwork in the 1990s, a[n online] conversation like we're having wasn't possible. The technology didn't exist to do this. It does now. And that makes it also easier for someone to set up a shop and live in some place in Iwate prefecture and work remotely. Or still have contact with people in other places in Japan or other parts of the world. In a way that was simply not possible before. I've noticed how different fieldwork is today from what it was. When I first started going there in the 90s, it was kind of the old-fashioned style of fieldwork. You go there, you do your work for a year and a half and you leave. And maybe you have communication via letters. There might have been a few people that I kept email contact with.

But in essence, it's like an on-and-off-switch. It's not like that now. This past summer, I did a fairly brief study on COVID in the town where I do my research, because a high school student contacted me and she was interested in Japan and interested in aging in Japan and as we started working on things I thought, "Oh, well, I can set up an opportunity for her to talk to some people there." So, we wound up having basically a focus group session with an English language class in Ōshū and the data was so interesting that we got a short paper out of it. It just got published. You just couldn't do that before and so I think the technologies that have emerged are also changing the nature of what it means to even talk about dualities of things like urban and rural. Because you can live a perfectly cosmopolitan lifestyle in a pretty remote place, not just in Japan but in lots of places. Now, I will say part of this is also related to the outstanding infrastructure in Japan. You cannot live a cosmopolitan lifestyle in many parts of Texas, because there is very little internet access. The United States is so large that there are large parts of the country in remote areas that do not have high speed internet. And so, they are not able to hook into those cosmopolitan flows in the same way people in rural Japan can.

SPR OK, so there are differences between different parts of the world. Because that would have been one of my follow-up questions of whether we could probably observe the same situation in the US or another part of the world. But you just made quite clear that there are some specificities in the Japanese countryside, especially concerning this distance or proximity so to say to urban lifestyle or urban centers. So, we have talked quite a lot about change right now, I would also be interested in the other side of the coin, which you mentioned. Consistencies in the countryside. What is still rural about Kanegasaki?

JWT Well, it still is agricultural. The overall area is still predominantly characterized by agricultural production. There is a lot of rice production. I hesitated a minute there because what I don't know off the top my head is in terms of proportion of the economy what that actually represents there. Because the problem is, as I talked about in the book, if you drive a Toyota Prius it might well have been built in Kanegasaki. There is a huge Toyota factory there. And there's a pharmaceutical factory and there's a semi-conductor facility. There's a big industrial park that probably accounts for most of the local economy rather than agriculture. But if you drive around

and look at things, agriculture is everywhere, but also a lot of unused fields now, because there is nobody to farm them. So, it's there but it's not at the level it once was. I think one thing that has remained pretty consistent is the sort of close-knit quality of social interactions. People feel very tightly connected to their community, their immediate neighborhood. Everybody knows everybody. The patters of life have a lot of similarities to the way they were 20, 30, 40 years ago. For example, you don't call up someone and set a time to drop by their house. You just drop by their house. And they just stop whatever they're doing so they can sit and have tea and eat or whatever and chat with you. That's still pretty normal. Another thing that in my experience really hasn't changed—it was a very car-oriented society when I was there in the 1990s, initially, or even back in the 1980s. Just because there aren't really trains in that area except for one train line. So that hasn't really changed too much. The other thing I would say is that in general the people conceptualize kinship networks and the way they think about their relationship remains pretty consistent. When you talk to someone, I think this is probably true in urban areas too, but when you talk to someone about for example their children, they still talk about the *chōnan*, the eldest son, the *chōjo*, the eldest daughter. They think in terms of birth order. They think in terms of inheritances being related to birth order. They think in terms of an expectation that a child will provide care for parents when they become old and they need help. Now, one difference is, it's really an adult child, it's not really the eldest son necessarily. And so, although there are still plenty of daughters in law who take care of their in-laws, compared to the past that's different, it's actually most likely daughters now that provide that care.

SPR   Can we attribute that to the demographic decline or is it just because society changed as a whole?

JWT   It's both. And what people have told me is that one of the reasons for this is the nature of care. A woman said to me once, "If you think about that, who would you rather have changing your diaper when you're old? A blood relative or a non-blood relative?" And for them, the answer was, "a blood relative". The privacy issue, the discomfort with having someone deal with declining bodily functions seems easier to cope with when the person is your child as opposed to your in-law. And some of that is of course related to the fact that people are living longer now than they ever did before. So, they encounter these problems in ways they didn't in the past.

I think there are a lot of consistencies, but I would say from my experience that pretty much every corner of life in one way is being challenged by the demographic changes, the interconnectedness with other parts of the world and other parts of the country. All of those things are shaping pretty much everything that's going on there in some way or another. I would say that there are definitely consistencies, but I think you have an overall context of change. I would say that's happening everywhere and it's always happening everywhere. The only thing that you can really count on is change. I don't really believe there are cultural consistencies in any society that are all that meaningful over any significant length of time.

SPR I think that's a good point and I would like to address this question a bit further, especially when we take a look at the people who come back to the countryside or people who start a new life there. In your book, you introduce us to a number of interesting entrepreneurs, most of whom share one characteristic that they have lived in the city for some years and then decided out of various reasons to come back to the country-side and start a small business there. You also already talked a bit about their motivations, but what about I-turners, people who moved to the countryside but have lived in the city for all of their lives. They do not have these social support structures probably, such as the U-turners might find it when they come back to the countryside. Did you observe some important differences in that respect as well or did you just focus on U-turners in your studies?

JWT As you mentioned in our email, you need to talk to Susanne [Klien] about that, because she knows way more about that than I do. I haven't run into anybody like that [laughs]. Which is kind of inter-esting. In terms of my field site, for whatever reason, I haven't bumped into someone who did that. So, I don't have a strong perspective on that from a data-driven way of looking at things. I just don't know anyone who's done the I-turn thing. I know, obviously, as Susanne has talked about it, it is an impor-tant feature of what is happening in rural parts of Japan, but each of the peo-ple that I have talked to, and this may be something a little bit self-selecting about my informants, but I talk to people who started businesses that it ac-tually cost a fair amount of money to get it going. And so typically where the money came from was either government or their families. And in most cases, it was a combination of both. And so, what that did was in terms of the people I talked to, when I wound up talking to people who had done a U-turn,

because in order to have the resources to start the kind of business they did they needed to have the finances to get going. So, there is a guy I didn't talk about in the book, I maybe talk briefly about him, he had lived in the city for a while and came back to start a pastry shop. He makes sort of Japanese-style European-style pastries. He had to build a building for this and it was a fairly expensive proposition and his parents came up with the cash for all of that. I think in my case at least those people, I'm sure there are people who have done the I-turn thing in the area where I do my work, but I just really don't run across them, again partly related to the fact of who I wound up talking to were typically people who'd come back to start some kind of significant business that required a fair amount of capital to get it going.

SPR   And for people who made the U-turn, so to say, did they find the traditional family structures or different social environment sometimes a bit difficult to adapt to again, because they have lived for so many years in the city? So, I suppose there might have been some issues concerning that. What did you observe?

JWT   The woman who runs the gelato shop, when she moved back, she got really annoyed, because people kept coming by trying to set her up for marriage. She doesn't want to be married. She actually told me that she thought men are stupid, which I thought was interesting since I'm male, but [laughs] she doesn't have much use for men and so she has just no interest in marriage. She just had a constant flow of neighbors for a few months after she moved back. There are a lot of middle-aged men in rural Japan who aren't married. They were trying to set her up. That kind of thing was an annoyance for her. The woman who runs the pharmacy—although it was her family's pharmacy, it was actually her husband who wanted to move back to Ōshū. She didn't. She liked living in the city and she liked as she described it the salaryman-type of lifestyle, where she went and did her work, came home and did things she wanted to do. The problem with running a pharmacy is that it's 24/7. They close at 6 in the evening and they'll be inside at seven doing something and someone will knock on the door so that they can buy something. You know, there is no stopping of the business. I think she has found peace with that. And it really constrains her ability to do things that she wants to do. I actually met up with her and her husband in New York a couple of years ago, and the reason I was able to do that was because the whole country shut down when they did the inauguration stuff for the

new emperor. Because their business closed they finally had an opportunity to travel which they both love doing. So, I happened to be in that area right around the time they were in New York. So, I took the train down to New York and spent a day together, which was really nice. She wants to travel, she's visited here in Texas. She's a huge baseball fan and, you know, wanted to go to a baseball game in the US and we did that. But she just doesn't have time to travel as often as she'd like. So that I think for her it is a constraint that comes with having moved to that area and taken over the family business. On the one hand she gets satisfaction out of that business, on the other hand she feels significant constraint preventing her from living a lifestyle that she would actually prefer to live.

SPR   I see. And this is also connected probably to one of the most interesting binaries I found in your book, which is also somehow comprehensible for me from my own observations in the Aso region in Kyūshū. Which is "female innovation" or "female modernity" vs. "male tradition". This is some issue that you kind of work out in your different narratives, I would say. So, to what extent do you think this kind of binary can explain the strategies taken by your interviewees?

JWT   Yeah, that was interesting. You emailed me that and I had to admit I never really quite thought of it that way. It's an interesting observation. I think the issue that kind of arises is—and we see it in the guy who has the pizza shop—on the one hand his parents had freed him to go off and do what he wants with his life. He's the oldest son. On the other hand, he feels a significant pull-back to his parents. And that was part of the reason that he wound up starting the pizza shop in the village there. Now, the other reason is, the capital wasn't that significant to that, because it's in a historical preservation district and they used an old building. The city paid for all of the renovations. All he had to do was come up with the kitchen equipment. Everything else was taken care of and his parents were able to help with the kitchen stuff. But he did indicate that there was this kind of mix of being pulled as the oldest son with also wanting to start his business. I think these stresses were going on with him. I'm not entirely sure if I would think of this as a binary and the reason I say that is because I think the women I encountered felt that way too. I think they felt pulled to their family. So, for example the woman in the gelato shop. She is one of three children, the youngest of three children. She is not someone in the sort of traditional struc-

ture you would imagine taking on the role of *atotori* or successor and that kind of thing. But she is also one of three girls. There was no male offspring in that household. The eldest went off and had a career in Tōkyō in advertising and the middle lives in the United States and so on the one hand it was an opportunity for the youngest to go back and start a business. She didn't really know what she wanted to do when she moved back. That happened when she moved back. But the other part of that she was taking care of her parents. Her father died not too long after she got back and so her mother was alone. So, the two things are kind of intertwined. I see some of the same kinds of pressures happening for both men of women in terms of family, but I also think that the sense in which men feel the responsibility of their status as for example eldest son is really looming over them, whereas women may feel more able to sort of improvise on that and come up with novel ways to deal with feelings of responsibility towards parents. In my head, at least, it hadn't functioned as a binary, but I think that's an interesting observation that you have.

SPR   Would you say that the experiences these women made in the cities may have influenced their decisions or their way to look into innovative ideas?

JWT   Absolutely. I think that's part of what happens that in living in the city they bring back the cosmopolitan identity that they've cultivated in their urban life. Now, of course, the gelato shop woman is actually an interesting example of this, because as you said in the introduction, she's lived in Europe and studied in Europe how to make cheese and gelato. She's very interested in international politics and all sorts of things. Also, I've known her a long time and I've noticed in the time that she's moved back, she's increasingly picked up the local dialect again. I don't know if it's because she's just picking it up again or if at some level she's subconsciously reconstructing the way she speaks to fit in better in the local environment. It could be some combination of those, but her identity is being reconfigured in that sort of local feature in terms of dialect she uses and I would say also probably her patterns of interaction have changed quite a bit. So, identities change. None of us really have a solid identity as we go through life, we're different people and she's a different person from the person I first met years ago. And part of that's conscious and part of that's adjusting as a business woman to a different environment that is unlike Tōkyō in that respect.

SPR And if you think 30 years back, for example, when you first entered the region, would such an ice parlor there be possible. And why or why not?

JWT No, I don't think there would have been...You know, I think, when I go back to that period of time, many of the goods—she uses a lot of mostly locally sourced things—that are available now weren't available there. Even in the mid-1990s. That means that people's experience of that are kind of different. She makes Gouda and Mozzarella, cheeses that were not normal thirty years ago. Just processed cheese was normal in Japan at that time. I don't think she could have had as much success. Maybe with the gelato, that might have been successful. The other problem is that that shop is in the middle of nowhere, so it's partly dependent on the capacity of busloads of people to stop there on their way to hot springs up in the mountains. That might have not been as successful in that respect either. Even the road, to be honest with you, if you were to go back to the 1960s, the roads out there would not have been passable by busses. There were many that were unpaved. By the 1980s everything was paved, but the bullet train isn't going to that area until the I think early to mid-1980s. A train ride from Tōkyō up there was, I think, 11 hours or something like that, even in the beginning of the 1980s. Now it's two and a half. I would say the pizza shop wouldn't have happened, because people weren't eating pizza. It would have just been really weird. Pizza is kind of fashionable in Japan now. The pharmacy would have operated but not of course in the way that it operates now, because there wasn't the need for elderly-related services as there is today. I think it's an important observation that you have to contextualize these things temporally. Because at one time, all of this might work out and at another time it just isn't going to work out. Time continues to flow and culture is not something that stagnates. Now we can do these things. As I said before, 15 years from now, most of this may not be possible anymore, because there may not be enough people to support the businesses.

SPR Thanks for that, John. I would like to change the topic a bit. As someone who is currently working on well-being in rural Japan, to me your book actually was an inquiry about well-being. I especially want to highlight your finding that the majority of entrepreneurs you have talked to emphasized that they wanted to be of some help to the local community or the local society. We know from Gordon Mathew's research on *ikigai* that in

Japan what makes life worth living is often closely linked to society or other people in the end. On the other hand, we can clearly see that also personal aspirations or individual goals are existent in your interlocutors' narratives. So how can we conceptualize this tension between individualistic aspirations vis-á-vis the importance of the social contexts as regards to well-being?

JWT That's a great question and I have to say that I hadn't really thought of it quite that way, but I can definitely see how one would read it that way. Let me explain a little bit the reason why that comes out. I am an American, right? So, entrepreneurialism is a big deal in the United States. People talk about it constantly. What I had noticed is when I talked about this with people in Japan, they didn't give the same reasons that I hear in the United States for becoming an entrepreneur. For Americans, becoming an entrepreneur largely first and foremost is to get rich. That's really the motivating factor. It's to make a pile of money. And then there may be some other factor. "Oh, well, I get satisfaction out of starting new things", something like that. That'll be kind of a personal side to it. When I talk to people in Japan about it, the money just never was at the forefront of why they were doing what they were doing. In fact, the pharmacist, she and I talked about that and I asked her and she just laughed and said, "Well, I don't mind getting rich." But that just wasn't the goal. And so, as I thought about that it occurred to me that the meaning of being an entrepreneur is different for Japanese, at least for the people I've talked to, than it is for Americans that I've run across. And it's certainly different in terms of the broad discourse of entrepreneurialism in the United States, where it's about making money. That's really the thing that's the motivating factor. So, I don't think in my head, I exactly conceptualized it as well-being, but I think that's a good way to put it, because the reason each of the people that I've spoken to is consistent. I don't think I've run across anybody with really a different reason. That they started a business, started to do what they were doing was in some sense to have some sort of individual satisfaction in their life, to be happy in essence, that's what they're looking for is some way to find happiness. The other thing that they do, and I think this is a point that you raise that is very important, is they contextualize that happiness in terms of the community that they're in. It isn't simply individual personal satisfaction and happiness, it's individual happiness embedded in a social context. And so, there is a kind of a feedback loop that goes on in terms of, "ok, this makes me happy, but this helps the community, which makes me happy". And this is how I see a big part of

what goes on in Japan. When I think about social interactions in Japan, and I sort of contrast them at least to the way Americans typically function, it's that Japanese have a natural other-orientedness. That does not mean they are not interested in themselves. I absolutely reject the idea of Japanese collectivism, that's bullshit. They are not a collectivist society. There is plenty of individualism around in Japan and all you have to do is go look at some Zen monks sitting in a cave staring at a wall for 40 years to know there's plenty of individualism in Japan. But the individualism is embedded in a sense that everything you do is reflected and tied to the people around you. And what that creates is a kind of having your antenna up to the things going on around you and a tendency that kind of constructs a sense of well-being in terms of those social linkages. The difference is where the ideology is. In Japan the ideological side emphasizes that kind of connectedness, while in the US the ideological side tends to emphasize the individuality. But both sides are doing both things. It's more like a continuum than a binary. And so, what I think people do at my field site (at least), is when they talk about the sort of, when they create a story of their well-being, they create that story in terms of tropes that are operating that emphasize the community in some way. That's often how they do it. And of course, this is overtly there in places like Kanegasaki where they talk about *machizukuri*, which is town making. So, in some ways a framework is created that they can situate themselves into to use, but they also believe it. It's not that it's just that they're parroting the things that the local government is saying. They also see that as being part of what they are doing. For me, it's an interesting observation to think about it as well-being and I think this is really related to a sense of taking individual identity, which is very important, but situating it in terms of how what one does influences and is reflected in the experiences of other people and the well-being of other people in the community.

SPR Would you say that this is something typical of the countryside you have observed or would we also encounter this relation in a city, in Tōkyō for example?

JWT I don't know. When I spend time in Tōkyō, I'm usually kind of isolated, so I don't really do fieldwork in Tōkyō, so I'm not sure I can make a good comparison. I might though go back to Ted Bestor's book *Neighborhood Tōkyō* which of course now is very old, but I think those elements are operating in that book in many ways. My own opinion is that this

is a component of Japanese society in terms of how people think about social interactions and how they think about identities being embedded in some ways in these social contexts. But I think it plays out differently in different places in the country. Again, I don't think you can make a neat urban-rural duality here, because I think Tōkyō is a different kind of urbanity than Sendai. Sendai is a big city, but it's not Tōkyō; it's a different environment. I think it plays itself out in different ways in different contexts. And certainly, a city like Tōkyō which has a lot of transient people, including Japanese who are there for a few years for education and maybe work, but then they go somewhere else. That's going to happen in a different way there and have different kinds of meaningfulness. The sense of what is a community, probably, will turn out to be quite different in an environment like Tōkyō as opposed to an environment like Kanegasaki.

SPR   I think that's a good point and it's also a good point or a good closing discussion. Unfortunately, the time is already over for our discussion. So now, I would also like to give the audience the opportunity to give some comments on the book or ask a question directly to John.

JWT   Thanks for that, Sebastian, that was a really great conversation, I enjoyed it.

SPR   I enjoyed it very much, thank you.

Q1   I first wanted to thank you for this excellent talk, I really enjoyed it very much. I wanted to refer to something you discussed earlier on. You said that you noticed how technology like we're talking about right now, had influenced your ways of doing research and I was interested to know, if you also noticed some influences on people's ways of life, when you did your interviews. What I'm really interested in, is, did you notice any changes due to technology or our current way of being able to talk to each other, to people's social networks or the composition or the size of peoples' networks? Or changes in how people communicate with each other?

JWT   It's an interesting question. On the one hand, it definitely changes in a sense that for example people have constant cell phone use; everybody has a cell phone, right? Just the ability to communicate…I'll

give you a little example. This is sort of sadly comical, but it was still pretty funny. There is an apartment up above the gelato shop and I stay there and I often go out. And if I'm going to be out, I pick things up for the woman who runs the shop and I was out getting tomatoes, because she makes tomato sorbet, which is surprisingly good. While I'm out I get a call on my cell phone from her. And she's like, "John, you need to come home. Right away." And she's talking really fast. I was not really following what she's saying, but I know the word "police is in there" and I'm thinking, "Ah, shit. I must've been speeding. The police are after me. They are at the gelato shop. They're going to arrest me." So, I get there and that's not what happened. What actually happened was that a customer drove her car through the front of the shop and so it was quite a shock to everybody. I got there, the car was still sitting half-way in the shop and halfway out of the shop. The capacity to rapidly communicate that to me, ask me to come back. That simply wasn't there when I started fieldwork. Communication has changed dramatically in the last 25 years or so. There is no question about that. On the other hand, I think, people retain components of traditional communication patterns, where they just drop by on each other all the time. And they bring vegetables. There is like a whole economy in free vegetables in rural Japan as they move around from house and house. People wind up with 5000 cucumbers and they don't know what to do with them. That still persists. That's kind of another form of communication. I see a kind of layering of this. When you talk about technology, technology is kind of a complicated term. We tend to use it to mean "computers", but cars are technology too, right? The automobile has dramatically changed lifeways in that area as it has everywhere. This technology which we're using right now? I don't know the answer to that question, because this just happened. This is because of COVID. As a result, I really don't know what's going on in those areas in terms of how that's changing social interactions. One of you needs to go study that, ok? Because I think it's a really important thing right now to think about how does the pandemic and then the technology that emerged because of the pandemic change the way people interact? That's just an open question right now.

Q2   First of all, thank you very much, Mr. Traphagan for the interesting insights on rural Japan. What role does sustainability or the awareness of sustainability play now in Japanese society? Or might play in the future regarding going back to rural areas and try to set up businesses over there? For example, when I think of Europe or the US, green farming is a

huge thing. People living in the cities and buying old farmhouses, renovating them. Is there an awareness of sustainability at the moment and what about the future?

JWT There's a lot of awareness of it and a lot of thinking about it. I would say that the meaning of the word "sustainability" may be broader for Japanese. At least in the area where I do my research. Because what needs to be sustained is not simply the environment, but the society itself with the population decline. I think for them the concept of sustainability is, "How do we sustain a livable world here? Keep the economy going?" Part of it is also thinking about environmental questions. As I mentioned a little bit earlier, there is a lot of interest in organic farming. In another part of Japan that I've gone to, Niigata, one of the things they are doing is encouraging farmers to do organic farming in part for the purpose of creating luxury products that they can sell at higher prices, because that helps to sustain the farming industry which is in trouble in Japan. There are quite a few housing banks, for example, in many rural parts of the country now. There are like eight million empty abodes in Japan. That's not an exaggeration, that's the actual number. What that means is that there are empty houses all over the place. And local governments are basically giving those houses to people who are willing to renovate them. In part because of the problems of tearing down a house is expensive, particularly when you have to get into remediation of things like asbestos. And so, what they do is that they basically give these houses to people and then in doing that they're shifting over the responsibility to people to renovate the building and deal of whatever kind of problems and they provide money to support the renovation of the building. The other thing that you are seeing is, in US we often tend to do things on a fairly large scale and what you're seeing in Japan with solar power—I'm seeing a lot of little local solar farms. So, there'll be a little neighborhood and one plot of land in that neighborhood has a whole bunch of solar panels on it that are feeding the houses in that neighborhood. And that's a model that's happening fairly frequently. There're solar farms sprouting up all over the place. Part of that's related to sustainability, but part of that's also related to the problem that Japan has with being way too dependent on nuclear power. The disaster 10 years ago alerted everybody to the fact that maybe building nuclear power plants on the most seismic reactive place on the planet is just not real smart. They've been moving in this direction. There's a lot of interest in that to be sure and I think this is something that someone really ought to do a study

on—for example to think about what it means to talk about sustainability for people in Japan or in a part of Japan, because I'm not convinced that it means the same thing that it might mean to me as an American or you as European. I think they may conceptualize it differently, but it's a great question.

Q3   Thank you very much for taking the time and for the insightful talk. Did you see any indications during your field research that the prejudice or the bias against the Tōhoku region influenced in some way the change that you describe in your book?

JWT   That's an interesting question. I'm not sure I really have an answer to that one. I don't think I ever encountered anything about that really. I never really spoke to anyone about it as far as I can remember. I think that prejudice is waning in many ways. I don't think it's the same that it was 30 years ago. There's that image of Tōhoku as being backwards and that's still there. But there's another side of it, where there are a lot of people who are really attracted not to live there necessarily, but they go there for weekends, because they like the beauty of the place and that sort of thing. A lot of people from the big cities will do that. I would say that the way that Tōhoku is constructed is in some ways changing for urbanites that don't see it necessarily quite the way that they did in the past. And, of course, the way it *is* is also changing as those urbanites move back or move into that area. It's reconfiguring itself as a different kind of place and that's part of the idea of cosmopolitan rurality. I don't think that binary is as strong as it used to be, even from a conceptual perspective, forgetting about the analytical side of it.

Q4   Thank you very much for the talk, it was really interesting. I'm definitely going to read the whole book now, which I haven't done so far unfortunately. One thing that really resonated strongly with me from your talk is how you explained how entrepreneurship is a socially embedded concept, socially embedded in local communities. I wrote a book on local interpretations on agricultural politics and policies in Japan which has looked at similar phenomena. One thing I wanted to ask is that at least from the agricultural and political side I noticed that different concepts of what entrepreneurship should look like are socially embedded, certainly, but there is no single right interpretation of what an entrepreneurship does. It's actually at least in agriculture a quite contested field that has politically charged concepts of what entrepreneurships do and what is right and what is wrong.

I wanted to ask if you have encountered this sort of conflicts about right and wrong approaches to doing business, being a community-oriented entrepreneur in your research.

JWT That's another really good question. I don't know that I really ran across the sense of right and wrong. I do think there are ideas in different societies about what the right way to be an entrepreneur is and then other things that they may argue is or isn't the right way to do it or the right motivation. I'm not sure that it's too strong, I think one has to put it into the context of this perceived crisis of demographics. And so, I think local governments are at the point right now where anything anybody is willing to do there is something they are willing to talk about it. Because if it's something that will generate the opportunity for people to stay or will help the local economy, then, ok if you want to call it entrepreneurialism, fine, do whatever you want to do, we'll help. That's really the mindset that I see right now, because there is this perception of a crisis they are facing because of the depopulation. They are also struggling to make things happen that they want to have happen. This international linear collider which is associated with CERN in Switzerland, it isn't happening. They have been talking about it. They decided on the place and the Japanese government won't commit to paying for it. That's a real problem for people in that area, because they see in a sense their salvation as a community in putting that piece of big science in there. Because what that'll do is it will stimulate the economy, it's going to bring in loads of people, interestingly a lot of people from other parts of the world, not necessarily just from Japan, which will change the whole nature of the place. And I think they see that as potentially stimulating a lot of entrepreneurial activity in the businesses that surround it. But it's just not happening. At least for the people there, I don't want to make much of a generalization about this, but the people there in government at least and the people surrounding are pretty willing to buy into anything someone wants to define as being entrepreneurial, because they perceive of their...it's not really even long-term at this point, it's short-term, 10 to 15 years in the future, as being quite problematic. Again, I think this is the issue of how context changes the way people use these kinds of ideas. And for people there the context is precarious. They're just trying for ways to stimulate new ideas. From an analytical perspective the point you raise is really important, because the word entrepreneurialism gets used in lots and lots of different ways, but it does not mean the same thing to say a government official or to someone who wants to

start a business. It does not mean the same thing, as I point out in the book, in different cultural contexts. Also, the way it's perceived is different. In the United States, being an entrepreneur is perceived as a very positive sort of thing. That is not necessarily the case everywhere. That notion that it's good to be an entrepreneur, that can also be perceived as being very self-centered and so I think the nature of the meaning of that has to be contextualized in terms of what you are looking at.

Q5   Thank you very much for the interesting talk and the discussion at this early hour. I was wondering, in the book you described spatial social depolarization or the pathway to a cosmopolitan rurality as a process that is continuously constructed by locals to reflect their desires and hopes for life now and in the future. It seems that this is probably very much a focus on the entrepreneurs that you're looking at, but how would you see the non-entrepreneurs in the community. Do you think they also have such a clear and conscious vision of what their community is supposed to be and also how do you see this in relation to the global corporations that come into the community? Don't you think that they also have a maybe much more powerful voice in shaping the community than the small business entrepreneurs themselves. What is your view on that and how do you integrate that into your framework?

JWT   I think in terms of conceptualizing the community you get lots and lots of different perspectives. As you say, the perspective of Toyota is going to be different from the perspective of the mayor of the town, perhaps, or somebody living in a village in the town. The Toyota factory has been there for a long time so it's very much a part of life in the area, but many of the people who work in the Toyota factory, particularly managers, are transient. They are there for few years and then they leave—and then production line people, there are a lot of locals who do that. So, I think the conception of what the factory does is different for people who are long-term residents as opposed to managerial people. You said an interesting thing. You said, "what the community is supposed to be." I think what I see there is more an ongoing co-construction of that. I'm not sure anybody knows exactly what the community is supposed to be. I think it's a constantly changing thing and they know it's constantly changing. They are aware of that and they are thinking about that. What I think is going on is that you have a variety of competing interests that come to play and, in some ways, they cooperate and, in some ways, they

compete, but they are all engaged in nudging whatever that community is in various directions. But it's a process, it's not a thing. There's nothing you can actually grab on to and say, "This is the community", at any given point in time. It's just this flowing thing that's being constantly redefined. I think they are very aware of that process, which in some ways may be different from say 50 years ago. I think some people were aware of that 50 years ago, but I think a lot of people maybe weren't thinking too much about it in daily life. And a lot of people are thinking about it now. I talk to people and they are aware of the demographic problems they are facing. They are aware of economic issues and they're consciously thinking about being engaged in that process of redefining whatever this place is. Even if they don't know exactly what it means. They don't know what the redefinition might turn out to be, but they are engaged in that and they are engaged in that partly because local governments pull people into it. The international linear collider, I mean that's a big local thing. They do things like have contests in elementary schools to draw pictures of it. They are trying to engage people into this to think about the direction that the place is going. I don't think there is really a definition of community that can be latched on to in any way. I think what's happening is the community itself as a process that has all these different stakeholders involved in it. And really the question is—kind of back to the question earlier about sustainability—how to create an environment that in some way is a sustainable environment for people to live in. That includes the natural side of things, that includes the business side of things, and also things like entertainment. The problem is that there is nothing to do there for a lot of people. And so, they leave. And particularly younger people; that's the issue with the demographics—It isn't just related to a low birth rate, it's also that if you grow up there and you want to do something different from the range of opportunities in Kanegasaki, you need to go somewhere else to do it. The other thing is that at this point because people are so tied into these larger flows, part of what is community there is also getting defined in these. I can give you a good example of this. I guess that nobody other than me is a baseball fan in this group, right? Europeans don't like baseball. Baseball is the American sport, but it's also the Japanese sport. Along with soccer historically it's the number one sport in Japan. So, one of the professional baseball teams in the United States is located in Los Angeles, they are called the Angels. There is a player on the Angels, his name is Shōhei Ōtani. He grew up in Ōshū. In fact, my son played Little League baseball with him in Ōshū, when he was a kid. He's become an international star. He was a huge star in professional baseball

in Japan. When he came to the US to play in major league baseball, he won rookie of the year in the first year. People from that community have gathered around him and he has become symbolic of their community in many ways. As a kind of representation of who they are. They talk a lot about his character as somehow reflecting something about that place, but also that they are embedded in these international flows. This one individual is having a fairly profound influence in terms of thinking about what it means for that place to be a community. I am not sure if I am answering your question very well, but I think part of the reason I struggle with answering that is because it's just this constantly reconstructing thing that's going on there. There isn't really a community to talk about in some respects, but it's getting tied into these other things like a baseball player who grew up there, who's playing in the United States and who's become a big star in the United States.

Q6 Thanks for the nice talk. I did not read the whole book, only the introduction of it. You mentioned that the basic act for promoting small enterprises by the government in 2014, which was made to facilitate the creation of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Have you seen some actual effects of this policies in your area? Were there provided detailed measures to address challenges that business operators are facing? Were they corresponding to something that actually was useful in Kanegasaki?

JWT That's a good question. Yes and no. The pizza shop that we have mentioned is actually built in a house that is about 200 years old. And it's part of a historical preservation district. The pizza shop is a product of government investment into the historical preservation district, but also into the business. They want things like that. They want to create a business like that. The shop is quite interesting. He serves pizza, but he also serves traditional local food. So, tourists who come in can try some sort of interesting local food or they can have a pizza. What I've seen is that locals who go there seem to often have pizza and tourists often have the traditional food. That's an example for something that's worked quite well. On the other hand, the woman who runs the little novelty shop that I talk about in one of the chapters—the entire street that she's located on was intended to be revitalized through a government program and it just utterly failed. Her business is the only one that survives and most of the buildings along that street are empty. And so, it's variable how this works out and I don't know exactly why that failed, but I think a big part of the reason it failed is because that part of

town is hollowing out in terms of population. There just aren't enough people there and there's also nowhere to park. It's all these cramped-in buildings and there's just nowhere to put your car. If you're going shopping, you are going to go shop at the bypass road that goes around the city and has big parking lots with strip malls. As much as they tried it didn't work out. What happens is that some of these programs will work quite well, if the context is a good context and then another program will just fail because they didn't really think through what people need in terms of taking advantage of the businesses they get produced there. This one shop is going to go out of business. I know the woman pretty well, she started another shop, actually in another city in a big shopping mall, because she realized that she wasn't going to maintain it for much longer. And if she wanted to keep doing that she was going to have to have a second store. There used to be a lot of people there and now if I go, there's nobody ever in this store. So, I think it's quite variable to the extent to which government involvement works. They are not all necessarily experts in things like redevelopment and so they make mistakes.

Q7   Thank you very much for taking your time and answering this last question. I will try to be very brief and thank you also for your wonderful talk. I am very interested as I am doing my fieldwork in an urban setting, but I know the area you're talking about a little bit. I've been there for some days and spend some time there, especially in the little bit northern town of Kitakami. I think in your introduction of the book, you were hinting to the point that there is this strong entanglement between what is feeling rural and what is feeling urban and this interconnectedness is somehow redefining what it means. Especially regarding to what you told us about entrepreneurship and the new possibilities that can be found on the countryside. I have to think about the other side of this coin. It's, "The urban dream not working anymore. The urban dream not coming true anymore." Like going to Tōkyō, maybe wanting to be successful there, but finding a not very good working environment. You don't get a good job, but you get some precarious working conditions and so on and so on. And then it's kind of a possibility to, even if it's still precarious in the countryside, you might get a little bit more of leeway or *yoyū*, because the local elites and the local conservatives are weak by this depopulation. They are kind of maybe more willing to accept new things because they are kind of standing against the wall. I think it's very interesting to see also how this is more a process, a circle of people moving

around and finding their niche, their spot. I'm very interested if you can say a little bit more about this interconnectedness.

JWT That's a great observation. I think what you describe is right on the mark. I think some people become disillusioned with life in the big cities and they want to find something else, where maybe they do have a stronger sense of community. *Or*, where they can just talk to someone in government. In Kanegasaki it used to be that I could just walk up in the city hall, walk up to the mayor's office and say, "Hi, I'm here." I would have a conversation with the mayor if he had the time. That's not going to happen in Tōkyō. And so, the capacity of people to be directly engaged with local government is much higher in places like Kanegasaki. So, if you want to start a business and you want government help, it's much easier to do. I think that's one thing that's kind of a pull and also a push out of the urban areas. The other thing that I have been told by several people, several women, is that part of the reason that they started the business was the problem of the glass ceiling. Women told me they couldn't be their own boss, no matter what they did in Tōkyō. The glass ceiling was actually very low. One woman told me that she wanted to pursue her own interests, do things the way she wanted to do them, and in her case for example one of the things that she wants to do is hire other women. She doesn't want to hire men to work in her shop. She can't do that in Tōkyō, it just wasn't possible for her. But it is possible out in Kanegasaki. One of the things that it has done for her is that it empowered her not only to run a business, but to really run her life the way that she wants to run it and to develop things in a direction that she finds appealing and interesting. That just wasn't possible in Tōkyō. I think you are right on the mark. There is this push also that is coming behind as for some people. I think it's not necessarily there for everyone. I think some people would just see an opportunity and they jump at it. This actually was at the very beginning of the research project the question that I started with. I was curious about what kinds of obstacles women who want to start businesses run across. That was the starting point of the whole thing. And then the project went in its own direction as they always do. But what I did find was that in several cases it wasn't so much that the women were having obstacles in starting their businesses out in Iwate. But they were having obstacles to continuing their careers and developing their careers in the city. So, Iwate then became attractive, because there was opportunity there for them to do what they wanted. I think it's a really important observation and again I think

that's an area where somebody could develop an interesting project, if they wanted to look into that kind of question.

SPR   Thank you again very much for taking your time to talk with us. It seems that we have kept you awake well and that's probably a good sign in the middle of the night. It really was a pleasure to discuss all these aspects with you. We also had many questions from the audience, so I suppose that many of this class will read your book during Easter holiday and that's it from my side.

JWT   Let me just thank all of you for all of your great questions. I really appreciated it and if you do decide to read the book, don't hesitate to email me with more questions. I am more than happy to engage in more conversation.