

**BEITRÄGE ZUR JAPANOLOGIE 50**

A photograph showing three cyclists from behind, riding on a paved road. They are wearing backpacks and cycling gear. The background features a rural Japanese landscape with traditional houses, greenhouses, and a range of mountains under a cloudy sky.

# **RESEARCH INTO JAPANESE SOCIETY**

**REFLECTIONS FROM THREE PROJECTS INVOLVING STUDENTS  
AS RESEARCHERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

**EDITED BY**

**SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN & ANTONIA MISERKA**

**RESEARCH INTO  
JAPANESE SOCIETY  
REFLECTIONS FROM THREE PROJECTS  
INVOLVING STUDENTS AS RESEARCHERS  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

EDITED BY  
SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN & ANTONIA MISERKA

BEITRÄGE ZUR JAPANOLOGIE

VERÖFFENTLICHUNGEN DER ABTEILUNG FÜR JAPANOLOGIE  
DES INSTITUTS FÜR OSTASIENWISSENSCHAFTEN  
DER UNIVERSITÄT WIEN

BAND 50

REIHENHERAUSGEBER\*INNEN

INGRID GETREUER-KARGL

INA HEIN

WOLFRAM MANZENREITER

**RESEARCH INTO  
JAPANESE SOCIETY  
REFLECTIONS FROM THREE PROJECTS  
INVOLVING STUDENTS AS RESEARCHERS  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

EDITED BY  
SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN & ANTONIA MISERKA

VIENNA 2023

The copyright of the individual contributions lies with the respective authors, the copyright of the book rests with the editors, and the copyright of the series Beiträge zu Japanologie belongs to the Department of Japanese Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna.  
© 2023, Vienna, Austria

In addition to the print version, an electronic version is also available on PHAIDRA (<https://phaidra.univie.ac.at/>) under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International).

ISBN 978-3-900362-33-1  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/BZJ-050-000>

Publisher and copyright:  
Abteilung für Japanologie, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Universität Wien,  
Spitalgasse 2, Hof 2, Tür 2.4, 1090 Wien, Österreich

Printed with the support of the Faculty of Philology and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna.

Print: Riegelnik GesmbH, Neustiftgasse 129, A-1070 Wien, Österreich.

Cover design: Julia Ramprecht  
Student researchers cycling in Aso.

Recommended citation:  
Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian / Miserka, Antonia (eds.)  
2023 *Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic* (= Beiträge zur Japanologie; 50). Wien: Abteilung für Japanologie, Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften, Universität Wien.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/BZJ-050-000>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN & ANTONIA MISERKA	
Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic—Introduction	7
<b>PART 1—GIVING STUDENTS SOMETHING WORTH RESEARCHING: INVOLVING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN RESEARCH AT SOPHIA UNIVERSITY</b>	
DAVID H. SLATER (PROJECT ADVISOR)	
Giving students something worth researching	17
AYANO SOMA (STUDENT)	
Positionality in student research with an African refugee: Negotiating successful interviewing through student mentoring as senpai	33
THAW TAR (STUDENT)	
Shifting perspectives under political stress: Interviewing Burmese students stranded in Japan	43
MEGUMI FAITH MALLARI (STUDENT)	
Understanding vulnerabilities virtually: Oral narrative research on a Syrian refugee amid the COVID-19 pandemic	51
<b>PART 2—EXPERIENCING RURAL JAPAN THROUGH REMOTE FIELDWORK: INVOLVING UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE STUDENTS IN RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA</b>	
HANNO JENTZSCH & SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN (PROJECT ADVISORS)	
Rural spaces, remote methods—the virtual Aso Winter Field School 2022	63
WOLFRAM MANZENREITER (PROJECT ADVISOR)	
Training for fieldwork in Japan at home: Reflections on the 2022 D Summer Field School	79
KATJA PALASZEWSKI, STEFAN PÖLLITZER, HANNAH PILAR EGGER & TOBIAS SIMEK (STUDENT PROJECT)	
Loneliness in Aso: Community-building against ageing, depopulation and pandemic influences	97
JOHANNA MAYR, LENKA MIYANOHARA & BENEDIKT SCHULTZ (STUDENT PROJECT)	
Tanoshimi ga nakunatta: Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social activities in the Aso region	111

WILHELM MAN DONKO, MELANIE STEINBRUGGER, MAX FORTIN (STUDENT PROJECT)	
The potential of remote areas—the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the disaster-prone tourism sector of the Aso region in Japan	121
RABIA DEVECI, KALOYAN IVANOV & JULIANA NEUNINGER (STUDENT PROJECT)	
The promotion of migration through the local Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai in Minamiaso	131

**PART 3—URBAN-RURAL MIGRATION AND RURAL REVITALIZATION IN JAPAN: INVOLVING PhD STUDENTS IN RESEARCH AT FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN**

CORNELIA REIHER (PROJECT ADVISOR)	
Studying rural Japan with PhD students during a global pandemic: Ex- periences from the research project “Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan”	145
TU THANH NGO (STUDENT)	
Overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned from joining a group project in times of turbulence	161
CECILIA LUZI (STUDENT)	
Adapting schedules and learning to collaborate: Reflections on a PhD experience in a group project during the pandemic	173

**PART 4—BOOK TALK**

JOHN W. TRAPHAGAN TALKING WITH SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN	
Cosmopolitan rurality and changing life in rural Japan	187
CONTRIBUTORS	211

SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN

ANTONIA MISERKA

## **Research into Japanese society: Reflections from three projects involving students as researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic**

### **The challenges and merits of fieldwork during COVID-19**

When teaching fieldwork and qualitative research methods that require a significant amount of independent data gathering, it is essential to provide training for students so that they can gain first-hand experience and learn how to deal with unfamiliar situations such as interviewing respondents (Manzenreiter 2020, 115). In some cases, training is closely linked with a current research project, thus providing students with insights into the research practice of their peers and professors. “Field schools”, for example, allow participants to experience the place of research, practise their qualitative methods on site and become integrated into a larger research project (see e.g. Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). Even in pre-COVID times, such endeavours were often time consuming and financially burdensome. Although part of the costs is often covered by various funding programmes, the additional expenses borne by students can be significant, especially when the research site is in another country.

The difficulties associated with on-site teaching of fieldwork practices have been further aggravated by COVID-19. In our field of Japanese studies, travelling to Japan was practically impossible during most of 2020 and 2021, thus raising the question of how to effectively teach qualitative methods without the students having the chance to actually *use* these methods for their research on Japan. Although the COVID pandemic exposed the vulnerability of our teaching practices, it also served to highlight the need to be flexible and adapt our methods to changing circumstances. In this volume, we demonstrate different approaches in uncertain times that enabled students to gain first-hand experience for their studies.

By collecting the experiences from three projects undertaken at different universities (Sophia University in Japan, the University of Vienna and Freie Universität Berlin), this volume reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of



digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016), the challenges of switching a project to “remote fieldwork” (Ugoretz 2021), ways of dealing with delays to an entire project and people’s responses to face-to-face-situations after a long period of social distancing. All three projects were affected by the pandemic to varying degrees and each developed its own strategies for tackling the difficulties. The projects involved students at different stages in their academic lives: undergraduate students at Sophia University, a mixed class of undergraduate and graduate students at Vienna and PhD students at Freie Universität Berlin. Even though students at Sophia University were based in Japan, they nevertheless had to conduct interviews online. Their eventual return to face-to-face interviews did not go as smoothly as expected but it provided participants with the opportunity to reflect on the important topic of interview situations. The “Aso Winter Field School” at the University of Vienna was based entirely on remote fieldwork, which was successful in many ways, although participants were aware of a certain lack of spontaneity and the “feeling of being there” (Ugoretz 2021, 62). The Berlin-based study group on urban-to-rural migration faced the difficult task of building a team during the time of COVID-19 but discovered that the challenges they encountered enabled numerous new experiences that might eventually serve to broaden the methodological horizons of those involved.

One of our aims is to show that research on Japan is possible during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and we hope that these accounts might be of help to others struggling with similar situations in the future. While all of us have had to make various adjustments to our teaching and research practices, we are convinced that including students in research projects is an enriching experience for all parties involved, regardless of the pandemic. From the student articles in this volume, we can see that their involvement in research has led them to reflect not only on their respective research topics but also on their positionality and what it means to interview other people. For the project advisors, the planning, conducting and evaluation of an entire project during these challenging times has caused them to rethink established research practices and learn new approaches, as most were not familiar with the various online and remote methods.

However, there is another important reason for choosing to publish these accounts of three different research projects. Although students might sometimes take part in research projects, their efforts are rarely reflected or acknowledged in the final outcomes. They might usually receive a mark for their academic involvement and their attitude and commitment to the pro-

ject, but they are rarely involved in the further analysis of the data, let alone playing a part in the published article. From a pedagogical viewpoint, we believe it makes sense to include students not only in the data-gathering stage but throughout the entire research process, including the writing up of the results. It is through experiencing all the stages involved in the current-day production of knowledge that they can understand the strengths and limits of academia. Also from an ethical perspective, we believe it is only fair and just to give students an equal voice in the publication process. The reflection sections of the students' papers demonstrate the strength of their involvement and commitment during the various phases of their projects, and including different perspectives on the research topic enables a broader understanding of the research process, thus making research more transparent.

Certainly, this is not a book about how to conduct fieldwork in general or how to hold an effective interview, as these subjects have already been covered in great detail (e.g. Bestor / Steinhoff / Lyon-Bestor 2003, Gmeinbauer / Polak-Rottmann / Purkarthofer 2020, Kottmann / Reiher 2020). Instead, we suggest this volume may be of interest to three different audiences: First, we hope to provide scholars with three creative examples of including students in research projects and of finding solutions for challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the articles have been peer reviewed and treated equally by the editors, so our hope is that their findings and insights might be of use to others researching their respective topics (e.g. urban-to-rural migration, the changing face of rural Japan, refugees in Japan). Third, we would encourage other students to read about the experiences of their peers in Japan, Austria and Germany in the hope that they too will be encouraged to see themselves not only as "receivers" of knowledge but also as potential contributors to a bigger research project, through which they can experience first-hand the collaborative production of knowledge.

### **Three arguments for including students in research**

This volume shows how research methods are taught and practiced at three different institutions and describes the opportunities given to students to contribute to research and become researchers themselves. It is divided into three sections, each focusing on a particular project. Each begins with a paper by the advisor(s) outlining the aim, methodology and challenges of the project and is followed by separate student papers describing their individual research as well as their reflections on their role within the larger research project and the challenges this entailed.

### **Part 1 “Giving students something worth researching”—involving undergraduate students in research at Sophia University**

We begin with Sophia University in Japan with one paper by the supervisor of the project and three papers by students. As the project mainly involved undergraduate students who had not yet chosen academic life, it focused on showing students the meaning of research along with methodological and ethical practices. While conducting research on refugees in Japan, the students were trained to hold interviews about appropriate topics and to reflect deeply on their experiences. It is apparent that talking to refugees proved to be an extremely thought-provoking experience and one that encouraged them to think about their positionality, the meaning of field research and their responsibility as researchers (e.g., ethical concerns). The project also demonstrates how research can be presented on a website, making the interviewees’ narratives visible to a broader public audience than traditional academic publications.

The first paper, written by David H. Slater, combines the didactic goal of preparing students to conduct research autonomously with reflections on ethical considerations concerning the vulnerability of interviewees. The second paper, written by Ayano Soma, aims to give voice to refugees applying for asylum in Japan. It focuses on her learning process and reflects her thoughts both on the methodological and the ethical concerns of their research project. In the third paper, Thaw Tar focuses on the experiences of Burmese students in Japan against the backdrop of a recent coup in their home country and its impact on their lives in Myanmar and in Japan. Coming from Myanmar himself, Thaw Tar reflects on his own positionality regarding his research topic as well as Japan’s role as a receiving country for refugees. The final paper in this section, by Megumi Faith Mallari, discusses her experiences as a member of the Sophia Refugee Support Group, which aims to support refugees in Japan and raise awareness of their plight through social media. The papers demonstrate how students can be excited at being actively involved in research even during the early stages of their studies.

### **Part 2 “Experiencing rural Japan through remote fieldwork”—involving undergraduate and graduate students in research at the University of Vienna**

The contribution by the University of Vienna comprises two papers by the supervisors and joint papers by four student groups participating in the project. Their project on the Aso region of Japan continues their department’s

long-standing research commitment to the area, which included a research trip with students in 2018 (Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). Wishing to continue this tradition, the supervisors had planned to repeat this experience in 2021 and conduct research on the pandemic's effects on life in the Aso region with the aim of involving students in planning, realisation and analysis of a broader research project, as well as gathering valid data on respective research interests. However, in light of Japan's travel ban announced in autumn 2021, they decided to switch to an online format and conduct remote fieldwork, relying on existing contacts within the Aso region and a colleague living on site acting as a communication link.

The paper by the supervisors Hanno Jentsch and Sebastian Polak-Rottmann introduces the research topic, as well as didactic considerations during the different phases of the project. It then reflects on the advantages and challenges of virtual research and how they attempted to overcome those as a team. The paper by Wolfram Manzenreiter, the initiator of the idea of a Field School in Aso, illustrates how previous attempts to involve students as researchers have been affected by the pandemic. He shows how the project has been transferred to a site in the Austrian Alps and shares the experiences of the participants. The first student paper of the Aso Winter Field School, written by Katja Palaszewski, Stefan Pöllitzer, Hannah Pilar Egger and Tobias Simek, focuses on the effects of social distancing and other restrictions on people's wellbeing, such as depression and loneliness. In the second student paper, Johanna Mayr, Lenka Miyanojara and Benedikt Schultz examine the effect of the pandemic on the activities of social organisations and traditional events held in the Aso region. The third student paper, authored by Wilhelm Donko, Melanie Steinbrugger and Max Fortin, examines the attitudes and approaches of the tourism sector in the Aso region when dealing with the pandemic compared with responses to natural disasters. Lastly, Rabia Deveci, Kaloyan Ivanov and Juliana Neuninger explore how the local Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (COKT) programme promotes migration to the Aso region in the online sphere and how it portrays the experiences of migrants in Minamiaso along with aspects of the region that are represented as important pull factors. All the students reflect on their experience of being part of a wider research project and of conducting research online. Their project demonstrates how data can be gathered using remote methods and how online interviews are an effective option when interviewing officials and the younger generation.

### **Part 3 “Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan”— involving PhD students in research at Freie Universität Berlin**

The project carried out by the Freie Universität Berlin is introduced in a paper by the advisor and papers by two PhD students who are members of the team. The project aims to prepare aspiring young researchers for their future within academia by providing them with the opportunity to take part in a larger research project while writing their PhD thesis. Their project reflects on the difficulties created by unforeseen circumstances, including having to adapt their research to an online format and rescheduling on-site research. It also shows how research projects may be made accessible to a wider audience using blogs and online meetings with colleagues around the globe.

In the first paper, Cornelia Reiher introduces the overall research project on urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan and discusses the challenges that the pandemic and Japan's travel ban posed for their collective research project and particularly for young scholars working within fixed budgets and timeframes. The second paper, written by Ngo Tu Thanh (Frank Tu), seeks to explicate how Japan's rural revitalisation policies, especially migration-based schemes, are envisioned, formulated, implemented and evaluated from a comparative perspective, while also reflecting on his experiences as a part of a larger research project. In the third paper, Cecilia Luzi reflects on balancing her work as a research assistant, PhD student and young mother while adapting her ethnographic research in light of the challenges posed by the pandemic. In all of their accounts it is apparent that challenging circumstances provided opportunities to try out new ways of research and collaboration.

All the papers in this volume underline the significance of students' contributions to their respective research projects and the academic community, as well as their success in communicating important social issues to the wider general public. We therefore stress the importance and the benefits of joining hands with students and producing academic knowledge together.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to JAWS for generously supporting us with a grant for language editing, and the Institute for East Asian Studies for the opportunity to publish our results. We would also like to thank all those in Japan who agreed to be part of the projects presented in this volume.

## References

- Bestor, Theodore C. / Steinhoff, Patricia G. / Lyon-Bestor, Victoria eds. 2003. *Doing Fieldwork in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Gmeinbauer, Christina / Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian / Purkarthofer, Florian eds. 2020. *Wiener Selektion japanologischer Methoden: Jahrgang 2020*. Vienna: Institut für Japanologie, Universität Wien.
- Kottmann, Nora / Reiher, Cornelia eds. 2020. *Studying Japan: Research Designs, Fieldwork and Methods*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram. 2020. "Same, Same but Different: Ethnografie und Teilnehmende Beobachtung." In *Wiener Selektion japanologischer Methoden: Jahrgang 2020*, edited by Christina Gmeinbauer / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann / Florian Purkarthofer, 91–120. Vienna: Institut für Japanologie, Universität Wien.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Miserka, Antonia. 2018. "Aus Studierenden werden Forschende: Ausbildung in der Summer Field School in Aso." *Asien: The German Journal on Contemporary Asia* 149: 82–98.
- Pink, Sarah / Horst, Heather / Postill, John / Hjorth, Larissa / Lewis, Tania / Tacchi, Jo eds. 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: SAGE.
- Ugoretz, Kaitlyn. 2021. "Demystifying Remote Research in Anthropology and Area Studies." *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 17, no. 1: 52–71.



# **PART 1**

**Giving students something worth researching:  
Involving undergraduate students in research  
at Sophia University**





DAVID H. SLATER

## Giving students something worth researching

The identification and development of the skills, mind-set and capacities necessary to help students become real researchers depend upon a number of institutional as well as pedagogical conditions. I have been fortunate that at Sophia University, these institutional conditions have been met. Sophia is a teaching-oriented university in central Tōkyō, and the Faculty of Liberal Arts (once called the Faculty of Comparative Culture) is the oldest international program in Japan. The social studies area has developed a long tradition of fostering undergraduate research, a trend that is just now emerging in many Japanese universities. While we teach a broad range of liberal arts classes, more than half of our professors research and often teach about Japan in one way or another. As a result, our curriculum on Japan is something that many students come to Sophia to pursue. It also means that our classes are often a collection of students from all over the world with different educational and personal experiences, language abilities, and research interests. This leads to a more diverse view of Japan and Japanese Studies. Within these very positive conditions, the role of the teacher or professor in developing young researchers is greatly supported.

In order to bring students into the research cycle, to give them the responsibility as researchers, we must listen to them, see where they are coming from and why they are doing research, and based on these goals, allow them to take the initiative and in time lead other students. It requires us to create a learning context where they can pursue their research in their own way. This requires a willingness to step aside and delegate responsibility to the students themselves. It requires a greater understanding of their abilities, and the limits of those abilities, and to be able to anticipate when and how they will hit those limits as they venture into research contexts that are usually not what they have been prepared for in other parts of an undergraduate curriculum. From this new role as professors, it means we must understand how to direct from behind, while being able to see the road ahead, allowing students to take the sorts of risks that almost any good research requires while keeping them safe and supported. Academically, this entails a collaborative practice of curriculum de-

sign and a shift in the pedagogical roles of the classroom. Finally, if we are to treat our students as researchers, it means that their scholarly product will be disseminated in some way beyond the classroom.

But the first step, one that the advisor must take responsibility for initiating and then facilitating, is to give the students some reason to do research, to be researchers. Unlike PhD students or other scholars who have already selected a scholarly life for themselves, undergraduate students must have a reason to do the rather substantial amount of work required to become a real researcher, and that reason usually comes from outside of the desire to further their career. As advisors, we must help them find and facilitate their engagement with real-world topics that are of interest and significance beyond the academy. Of course, while they might learn valuable research skills by interviewing their classmates about some part of academic life, I have found that engaging students in my own research and support activities, especially those that have some impact on what some call the “outside world”, is the single most important stimulus in exciting the research impulse strongly enough for them to make the commitment of time and energy.

## Student researchers at Sophia University

The research program that we have created to develop student researchers came out during the triple disaster of 2011. For me, like many scholars, teachers and universities in Japan, the triple disaster of 2011 was a turning point in how we imagine the goals of academic research, the possible contributions of the university to the larger society, and which sort of programs can be developed around these issues (For a fuller review of this research, please see Slater et al. 2020) and it was also a turning point in the ways that we can imagine and develop our students as researchers working on meaningful topics and producing scholarly results of some relevance.

As all of eastern Japan was rocked by the earthquake, quickly the scenes of the tsunami began to inundate us, mostly through social media. The threat of radiation leakage soon followed. On almost everyone’s mind was the same question: “What can we do?” Many of us went up to Tōhoku to help as soon as it was possible. We were volunteering our labour to do whatever manual work that we could—mostly digging rubble out of the few remaining structures, gutters and what was left of the house foundations. I think that virtually no one thought of this as a “research opportunity”, even though this singular event probably generated more research in the subsequent years than any other event in the history of Japan. Like many academics, I also brought my seminar students (*zemi-sei*) with me.

Two experiences during this period allowed, or maybe forced me, to rethink the potential contribution of scholarly work to society and to understand the importance that students could have in that effort. First, we were digging rubble one day in Tōhoku, and an old woman, inspecting the ruins of her house, called us over. She said that she had seen our camera and wanted to tell us something. She explained that her government had forgotten her, and the mass media just wanted to tell their already decided stories—not her story. She explained, “I thought that maybe you young people could take down what I have to say—because I have a lot to say”. And then said, as almost an afterthought “And you can tell others about...all this,” she spread her hands out across the wreckage that was once their homes. It dawned on us all that in fact, she was asking us to leave the digging of rubble in her house, so that we could record an interview with her. My students, being anthropology students, were equipped to do this sort of thing, although only in a classroom context, but we naively began the interview. She had a lot to tell so our interview lasted over three different visits to the site over the coming weeks. Each time, after a morning of digging, my students began interviewing her about her community, what was left of it and what lay ahead. This was my first experience with students as fully fledged researchers.

The second experience occurred in the classroom. In an effort to address the disaster in some way, I had thrown out my previous syllabus and with some feeling of accomplishment, presented my students with a new “disaster anthropology” syllabus. But when they got it, they were confused, and began to huddle together. After some minutes, they came back to me and said, “While we really appreciate this, Professor, this is not what we had in mind.” They continued, “We do not want to read about other disasters. We want to help and research this one, our own disaster.” Their proposal was that we continue to go up to Tōhoku each weekend, take the overnight bus from Shinjuku to arrive at dawn Saturday morning of volunteer work, interview in the afternoon, repeat on Sunday and take another overnight bus on Sunday midnight back to Tōkyō. They would write fieldnotes and make transcripts of whatever interviews we got, and then at the end of the semester write this up to get credit. I accepted their proposal. This experience showed me two things—if given the chance to do meaningful research, students will expend great energy and effort. Also, if I let my students take responsibility for their own learning, this effort could result in real research. The rest of this article outlines some of the practices that we have developed in the past decade in order to guide that effort in a productive way, from our post-disaster origin (Voices from Tōhoku, see <https://tohokukaranokoe.org>) and now our subsequent iteration as Refugee Voices Japan.

## Students as researchers

While most of the short articles put the stress on the researcher part of “student researcher”, I think we need to begin with the student part. The students in our program are quite anomalous in Japan. The majority are “returnees” (*kikokushi-jo*) who have spent some significant portion of their lives outside of Japan, usually in an English-speaking country, during high school. They are a hugely diverse group, having grown up all over the world and bringing with them a much broader wealth of experience than found at almost any department in Japan or many other countries for that matter. Overall, they are relatively wealthy, from cosmopolitan backgrounds and now going to an elite private university. On the other hand, their Japanese-language ability, and their familiarity with Japan as either a scholarly study or as lived experience is less developed than the average Japanese college student’s. I teach anthropology within a social-studies area, and our program is designed to introduce them to Japanese society, economy and politics in a critical way that can cause some to be uncomfortable because it is at odds with much of what they have learned in school. This research class is usually taken by anthropology or sociology majors as one of the distribution courses for their major, during the third or fourth year.

Students have complex and often not fully formulated positionalities (Robertson 2002). By positionality I mean their relationship to the project, to the research subjects (in our case, once disaster survivors but today refugees) and to the act of research itself. I try to begin by understanding why each student is doing research, what they are looking to get out of the research, and what they are willing to put into the research (in terms of time and energy, but also their emotional commitment). If their goal is just to get a grade, the time and effort required of this sort of class is usually too large, and they drop the class. Do they want to become a professional researcher? Often, students who take this sort of class have graduate school as their immediate goal upon graduation, and many see this research opportunity as a means to accumulate the skills and credentials necessary for admission. In that case, students are often more motivated to do outside research, do individual-skills development and spend more time refining their writing for the project. Is this project part of a larger personal agenda of social justice? This is also quite common and today, many, but not all, of our researchers are also active in the Sophia Refugee Support Group<sup>1</sup> (explained below). These sorts of students will spend more time and energy outside of class with our “research subjects” (disaster survivors or later, refugees), building an unstructured and

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/sophia.srsg/?hl=en>

very personal relationship. More generally, positionality speaks to the race, class and gender of students as this is related to our research subjects. Thus, just taking the students who submitted their own pieces to this collection as examples, a Burmese (Thaw Tar) interviewing refugees from Myanmar will have a very different relationship with his research subjects than a Japanese (Soma Ayano) interviewing an African, or a Filipina student (Megumi Mallari) interviewing a Syrian who just fled the war. This is a complex dynamic that each of our student researchers talks about in their essay, and it is a recurrent point of discussion among the research team. From the point of view of the professor, we need to remember that in order to facilitate the transformation from class group to research team, from student to researcher, the professor/research-team leader needs to acknowledge the individuals in their team.

### **Researching vulnerable populations and support**

Our project falls within a number of different subfields, one of which is applied anthropology. A minimal early definition might be the application of the methods and theory of anthropology to the analysis and solution of practical problems (Stewart 1983). Sol Tax is often credited as the founder of this subfield that he at first described as “action anthropology”, an approach that studies anthropological problems. It pursues it in a context of action where the anthropologist “would not keep herself as a mere observer, but is involved intimately in solving problems” (Tax 1975, 514). Kedia and Van Willigen (2002, X) update this definition as “process as a complex of related, research-based, instrumental methods which produce change or stability in specific cultural systems through the provision of data, initiation of direct action, and/or the formulation of policy”. We might say that action or applied anthropology is the praxis-based engagement of anthropological research that includes direct researcher involvement with the goal of transformative activism within the participating community.

Interestingly, there is very little scholarly literature on the ways that undergraduate students can be engaged in these projects within the field of anthropology, and in only a few university programs do we see any effort to include this in the training of graduate programs even when they offer a course on how to integrate undergraduate students into anthropological research. Until recently, most anthropological research was conducted in far-flung locations that prevented anyone but professionals or PhD students from visiting. But even today as we have shifted to more “at home” ethnographic projects, (see Kottak 1982 for a classic statement) anthropology has not produced the library of systematic literature on the role of training of students as re-

searchers. In contrast, there are numerous other examples outside of the discipline, most of which fall somewhere along a gradient from volunteer support (see Hagan 2021) to researching social problems (see Johnson 2005 in sociology) but there are few systematic efforts to link these two goals in a disciplined fashion, and almost no scholarship that addresses these ad hoc efforts.

More specifically, we are working with vulnerable populations, a fact that has certain implications for the involvement of students. The people we have worked with have shifted over the years, from 2011 survivors in Tōhoku to radiation refugees who fled mostly Fukushima to foreign refugees seeking recognition, currently living in the Kantō area. While diverse in geography, age and life-course trajectory, they as both individuals and as groups fit most definitions of “vulnerable populations” (Merry 2005). There is rich literature on the challenges, and the need to be researching these populations within anthropology, although it has not produced a synthetic or consensus perspective within anthropology (Marino / Faas 2020) nor in adjacent qualitative research fields (Pinto 2019). The work on research with refugees, in particular, is less developed (but see Ramsay 2020 for a recent perspective). More specifically, focusing on the methodological practice, we might say we are working on oral narrative, even though there is little consensus on the use of this method across a wide range of vulnerable populations including disaster survivors and refugees (Hoffman 2019; Pennell 2017). One aspect of the field of oral history of refugees is more developed due to the rather particular ways that interview data can be used as “testimony”, a type of material that has in the past ten years become increasingly important in scholarly work on what counts as evidence, in particular, within the context of a refugee-recognition applications and court hearings (Pennell 2017). While this is not the place to outline this literature, I will focus on those aspects of this dynamic that appear to be systematically different when conducted by students, most notably the immediate interview situation. (For a full discussion of the methodology employed by the project, please see here in English<sup>2</sup> or here in Japanese<sup>3</sup>).

## A differently configured project

Even in this cursory review of some of the literature, it is important to note that our projects begin from a very different place than that which is assumed in much of the literature, and this difference speaks directly to the role of students as researchers. In this literature, most often it is assumed that inter-

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapan.net/wordpress/methodology/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapan.net/wordpress/methodology/ja/>

view questions about a refugee's life will be generated from a review of previously published literature in the field. It is assumed that the interview is often the first time researchers will have met the research subject. These extremely difficult circumstances often yield rather random results, and then usually involve a process of trial and error, even when the research is conducted by very experienced senior researchers. It would be unreasonable and unproductive, especially in the context of a single semester, to expect students to get very far in any substantial data collection.

In our project, rather than encountering a refugee as a research subject initially and primarily within the context of data collection (usually in the context of an interview or survey), our relationships with our subjects all date back to an earlier relationship of support, efforts primarily run by students through direct contact with the refugees. It is through this direct and personal contact that we establish a pre-research relationship that in turn allowed us to begin to understand the background, current situation and future plans of the refugees. By the time refugees volunteer to be interviewed, they have met me and many other students, and usually have already gone through at least one interview with some of the more senior researchers in our program. This is not to say that this early contact makes the refugees less vulnerable; rather it is that the students and I are more familiar with the nature of their vulnerability and can try to adapt accordingly. This is also not to say that the start of any formal interview does not also present its own challenges, but this pre-research contact enables even students to overcome many of the initial hurdles of any interview—familiarity, establishment of trust, etc—considerations that are perhaps even more important in the case of refugees or other vulnerable populations. Below is an outline of the nature of this contact in order to illustrate one way to prepare students for better research.

### **Our support effort—the Sophia Refugee Support Group**

Through student support groups (university “circles”, an important part of student life in Japan), we have organised different forms of volunteer support for our target populations, from digging rubble in Tōhoku, to tutoring children who have relocated from Fukushima to our current group, Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG). This sort of engagement is an important opportunity for the students to understand the immediate situation of refugees in Tōkyō and to get to know the individual refugees who might volunteer to be interviewed. As such, it is also an important opportunity for students to begin to understand the need and significance of the research



itself, especially for 20-something students with relatively little worldly experience. Currently, the SRSR conducts monthly “Refugee Cafes” where refugees and students gather, teach and learn Japanese language and life strategies for Tōkyō, periodic talks by lawyers or doctors, but mostly it is just a chance to do some ‘deep hanging out’ with each other. The act of support allows students to better understand the overall situation, to learn how to speak to them in a natural way as they engage in a relatively structured and important activity of providing support. Once research begins, the familiarity, sometimes friendship, that is established with the narrators greatly helps students and informants navigate the relatively intimate setting of the interview.

The relationship between the support and research part of the project allows students to experience the reciprocal relationship between the two. Not only does the support facilitate better research—allowing us to establish familiarity and specific knowledge of individual refugees’ situations—but the results of research are also used to better target the support efforts moving forward. The result of the research, the knowledge that students gain from systematic ethnography—interviewing or participant observation—always includes numerous insights into the needs of this vulnerable population. These insights are culled from the research and used by the Sophia Refugee Support Group to refine current and initiate new programs. For example, in our research on female African refugees, we came to understand the need for hygiene products. Today, each month we send to our refugee friends a wide array of these products—easily sourced by us but harder for the refugees to secure. Similarly, after listening to a number of stories of failed refugee applications (Japan usually recognised less than 1% of all applications) ostensibly based on the rejection of non-Japanese language documents, the students developed a document-translation subgroup. In our case, our multilingual students were uniquely prepared to undertake this important job of providing translations of necessary documentation for the refugee-asylum application.

For students, seeing this link between scholarly and support activity is an important way of making our research “useful”, of having some feeling of accomplishment that they have impacted the larger world around them. For more experienced academics, we often tell ourselves that publishing in a journal has some of this same function—which in some (unusual) instances could be true. Students usually like to see a more immediate effect of their work and in a shorter time frame. This recursive relationship between the support and the scholarship services that purpose.

## Research pedagogy, *zemi*-style

The literature on students as researchers is quite developed in terms of the pedagogical practices and challenges within the immediate context of data collection (e.g., Fraser et al. 2004, which brings up some issues we will address below). There is also a stimulating if smaller body of literature around ideas of social justice that documents students as engaged in more activist research in their own student communities (Ginwright / Cammarota / Noguera 2006; Sherrod / Flanagan / Kassimir 2006). This is all interesting and relevant scholarship but perhaps more than any other aspect of developing students as researchers, it is important to note that each classroom setting is part of a larger culturally specific set of expectations of what an appropriate and productive learning environment should be—Japan is no exception. Within the context of the class itself, we mostly adhere to a workshop style or what we call *zemi* (originally based on the English word “seminar”). Because many of the students take the course for multiple semesters, we have a number of age and experience levels in the class at once. In a *zemi* class, older and more experienced students called *senpai* take an active role in the running of the class, sometimes recognized as teaching assistants, with the primary role of mentoring younger students, or *kōhai* in Japanese. This requires a displacement of the professor, and with a few exceptions, there are few lectures by me; even when I lead discussions at the start of the term, one important goal is to move into a less “teacher-centred” format. Students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. Students are presenting to the class materials that they have found or generated which are necessary for the success of the whole group. Most of the students who have gone to a Japanese high school are familiar with the experience of sustained group work, guided by older students with a large amount of the task distributed by and to each student.

This format might seem at first to be less labour intensive for the professor, but in fact it takes some time to learn how much can be delegated and what sort of monitoring is necessary, tolerated and sought by students. It depends on very able *senpai*, who fully understand the nature of research and of the course and are able to stay in close communication with you. A good *zemi* also requires quite a bit of buy-in by students, as they are being asked to make a greater commitment of time and energy than in other courses. For some, they welcome this expectation in exchange for greater autonomy and responsibility in their own research, others do not. At least some level of familiarity with the format of the *zemi* is also very useful. For the foreign-exchange students from America or Europe in our programme, some of whom take this

class, this sort of work seems less familiar, and at times, integration with the students from a Japanese background is a challenge. In the words of one of my most experienced Japanese students, “I really like having American students in the class—they always have interesting perspectives and are willing to share them, but one thing—they really do not know how to work in groups”.

While there are a few basic shared readings assigned by me—mostly primary-source documents such as the Convention on Refugees, and some literature-review articles to give them a sense of the parameters of the field (e.g., “The International Law of Refugee Protection” [Goodwin-Gill 2014] and “Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration” [Clark-Kazak 2017])—we move as quickly as possible to students themselves developing annotated bibliographies of their topic. These would include the statistical profiles of today’s global-refugee crisis, an outline of the shifting patterns of immigration flows in Japan, country reports from the refugee narrator’s home country, legal documentation, reports by the Japanese Immigration services, reports by the different Bar Associations in Japan, and theory and comparative ethnography on the topics of interest as they seek to narrow down the focus for the term. This material is checked and guided by me and *senpai*/TAs, but all done by the students.

The most teacher-centred aspect of the course is the detailed training in oral-narrative and ethnographic interview methodology. This requires question generation, interview techniques, and turn-taking (and then later, transcribing, coding and analysis). Because each of our narrators usually has had some previous interviews, the transcript and video recordings for that interview provide an important chance for them to be exposed not only to interview flow in general, but also to the particularities of each narrator. The *senpai* then take over the practice of the interview technique, conducting mock interviews and holding meetings on how to deal with the most common problems.

## Students interviewing Vulnerable Populations

The logical and ethical challenges of working with vulnerable populations such as these are well documented in the literature (for example, in the European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2020) and it is not necessary to recite them here, but to note that we strictly follow the principles and best practices designed to ensure refugee safety and security. All students are trained to understand and practice the importance of conducting interviews that are structured about “dignity, respect, human

attention and empathy” (Hoffman 2019, 139). They also follow the principles and practices of consent, confidentiality and presentation of data. For example, we use non-coercive recruitment procedures and always have a fully informed consent agreement in writing. Moreover, our refugee narrator retains full control and ownership of their data, image, voice and story; at any stage of the process, they can withdraw participation and any data collected to that point. Because central to our project is the publication of findings, the refugee narrator has full approval (or disapproval) of all content, design, images and text that goes up on our website, and approves of all narrative and video clips that go up on the website. Since the refugee narrator’s story, face and voice will all be available for public consumption, this is important. This is important not only to protect the narrators—our first priority—but also to impress upon the students the possible real-world implications of the collection, analysis and presentation of data.

Students as researchers do present additional challenges as well as opportunities especially in the immediate context of data collection—the interview itself. In most, but not all, cases, our student researchers are younger than the refugee narrator. As such, for many narrators, they do not carry the same amount of authority nor demand the same amount of respect that a more senior researcher (or professor) might. There have been some cases where the refugee decided that they did not feel comfortable speaking to students. Sometimes, although it was rarely verbalised in this way, they saw my assignment of student researchers to their interview as a lack of respect. As one refugee explained to me, “At first, I thought that you were taking me and my story lightly by having your students [rather than yourself] do the interview. That upset me, to tell you the truth”. He continued, “I did not want to talk to a bunch of kids”. Instead, he wanted to talk to “someone in charge”, and in this project, as in many projects, that meant the professor. This refugee eventually became one of our most interviewed narrators and ended up forming very close bonds with some of the students, but these were his first feelings.

Sometimes, refugees have been hesitant because they did not think young people knew enough about the world generally and the refugee situation in particular to understand the complexity of their story. To address this feeling, our students have to be as fully informed as possible, and often have to work to gain the trust of the refugee narrator by demonstrating this knowledge. (This is rarely necessary when an older researcher conducts interviews.) At times, I have the first interview with the refugee, alone or with some of the students, in order to put the students in the same frame of “researcher” as I

am. We might slowly transition from me to them as the primary interviewer, as the refugee narrator begins to feel comfortable and accepting of the students. If this fails, we also might abandon the students as interviewers, and I would conduct the interview myself or with my senior colleagues. This represents a pedagogical failure—that we have failed to create a situation where the students are fully involved in a way that allowed the refugee narrator to feel secure. But in those unusual cases when this has occurred, students have once again seen the strong feelings and real-life consequences of the practice of research.

Far more often, the fact that the research was conducted by students was accepted and welcomed by the refugee narrators. The reasons are many. Any refugee-asylum applicant has been interviewed by immigration authorities many times (at least half a dozen in most cases), in what are almost always contentious and even combative events where the primary aim of the interviewer is to cast doubt on their refugee story as a justification for rejection of their refugee application. The students, in their unassuming and usually friendly way, present a dramatically different interview context, where the refugee usually feels far more comfortable than in any of the other interview contexts that they have experienced with authorities. But other times, refugees are also more comfortable talking to students than to me. One woman explained, “It was easy to talk to students—they are always nice and want to know more”. She continued, teasing me a bit, “And no offence, Professor, you are an old white guy, even if you are wearing a polo shirt”.

Part of the welcome of students by refugees lies in the excitement at being able to tell a group of young people the real situation of their lives. Most refugees, at least in Japan, feel that few know their story and fewer still care about it. They also recognise that more often younger people than older people are open to them. One Cameroonian refugee explained that “I have a long story, my story. [The situation in my country] will not be resolved any time soon. So, young people are our future, the future of Japan, and they are the ones who should know”. Behind this is the hope, or maybe faith, that these young people will produce change, that they are more likely to be willing and able to act upon the knowledge that they get from the interview. As this same Cameroonian noted, “This might not help me, but it could help others”. In this case, the youth and inexperience that inevitably comes with student researchers are understood less as a handicap than as an opportunity.

Even with these positive feelings, the interview is not without challenges. The more a narrator sees their role as educating the students, the more they

will usually be in control of the interview, dominating the talk, dictating the flow of topics and at times even checking or testing the understanding of the student researchers. While in a sociological survey sort of exchange, these patterns would derail the interview and compromise the collection of data, in semi-structured, ethnographic interviews, this pattern allows the interviewee to steer the discussion to what is important to them—one of the goals of this sort of interview. Nevertheless, the student interviewers sometimes struggle to introduce the sets of questions that they have prepared within the larger flow of talk, an important part of learning how to manage the interview and secure useful data.

With younger refugee narrators—for example, other college students—there is often an establishment of a sort of rough equality of status with student researchers. This can result in a high level of comfort and trust, a shared frame of reference especially for popular cultural references and similar humour, all of which produce a high level of comfort quite quickly on both sides. One challenge in these sorts of instances is to prevent the interview from falling into sort of a chat session, and to keep the research-related information flowing in a way that results in substantive research. Nevertheless, this is a sort of context that senior researchers could not replicate, and where students do a better job in some ways.

It is always important to remember that when you are interviewing, the research instrument is not a digital audio recorder or a camera—it is the whole person of the researcher, their specific race, class and gender, their face, gesture and eye contact, the knowledge and personality. And age or status. And students and younger researchers are different and thus bring new and distinctive ways to relate in an interview, and thus different sorts of data collection and production are also possible. Each interview is different, and most interviews fall somewhere between these examples, but the sort of dynamics that are presented when students act as interviewers is predictable and thus can be anticipated, and must be prepared for by the professor.

## Dissemination of Findings

Although this is the final step in our research project each semester, it is one of the most important because for students the difference between “homework” you do for class and “research” often hinges on dissemination. As one student explained, “The thing I hate about school is that I work so hard on my papers, submit them, and that’s it. Some teachers give me comments—many do not—but either way, that is the end of it, the end

of my work. It does not go anywhere and does nothing”. Point well taken. It is important for the professor to make some way for the results of the students’ efforts to be taken outside of the context of the classroom. Above, I have noted one important “use” of our research—the direct application of findings to identify the needs and the possible solutions to those needs to improve the lives of our refugee friends, which sits at the heart of our support effort. But there are also other types of dissemination as well.

Some of the students’ research work is good enough to be published in a journal, or otherwise shared with a wider audience. In those cases, I try to co-author papers with them if they are not quite ready (a topic for another paper). Of course, at least at the start, most students are not ready for peer-review journal publication. But even those students who are producing very high-quality work are often not (yet) focused on the academic pipeline of article writing as a suitable, interesting or even worthy end goal of their efforts. One fourth-year student asked me and the whole class, “Why would we even want to write an article that you have to go to the library just to access, maybe pay money to read and then no one really reads anyway?” This comment goes back to the beginning of the paper where I noted that it is important to understand students’ motivations. In an academic ecosystem that has traditionally had a narrow view of scholarship (often limited to peer-review journals), part of the role of a professor in mentoring students as researchers includes a widening of our usual definition of the evaluation and dissemination of the scholarly work. It is also our responsibility to find some venue to make this happen. If research findings are to be taken as seriously pursued ends, demanding time and energy, creativity and insight, they must be shared in some way.

At the end of each semester, all students publish their findings on a website that is open to the public. Voices from Tōhoku, our Japanese-language website with thousands of short clips of survivor narratives from the 2011 triple disaster has had more than 10,000 hits—rock-star numbers for an oral-history website, and one of the largest of any undergraduate-oral history website of any kind. It is also the largest site of its kind on the 2011 disasters. Refugee Voices Japan, our current website began in English and is just now opened; we are translating the material into Japanese as time and budget allow. This is one way to allow us to share students’ research beyond the spaces of the classroom and the time limitations of the semester. Putting up and maintaining a website that continues on from year to year as students graduate and move on is important work that inevitably falls upon the professor, at least as the only person who is there over time. It requires some development of



skills and mobilisation of labour (editing, web design, etc.) and securing of financial resources (for labour as well as server and maintenance). For me at least, this has meant an effort to navigate the academic bureaucracy that usually, at least in Japan, has quite different ideas of what education is, how it is enacted, measured and given credit for, and how it is funded (or not). It probably means some lobbying of the public-relations sectors of the university to convince them that this sort of effort is worth supporting from a recruiting and reputation-building point of view.

### **Concluding Remarks**

If the first step in our effort to develop young researchers is to give them something worth researching, the final might be to help them understand the unpredictability of real research. In order to move from controlled environments of classroom-practice sessions to actual research, it is necessary for students to realise that the way research is planned and how it ends up is often quite different. And they have to understand that at times, the best-laid plans fail to produce the sorts of results that lead to publishable work or even completion of the data collection. Because we are dealing with “human subjects”, different members of vulnerable populations, most recently refugees, their situation is insecure, in constant flux and they are often unable to complete the series of interviews required under our current research schedule, all due to factors outside of the students’ control. Moreover, there could always be interpersonal situations that do directly involve the students such as personality conflicts, different visions of where the research focuses, and even racial or ethnic conflicts. Students have to be made aware of these circumstances and the possibility that they might impinge upon the original research plan, and be ready to refocus, sometimes overhaul, their research plan on the run. While it is difficult to learn these skills, they are some of the most important to the development of sustainable and adaptable researchers, students or not. Again, these are issues that go back to the fundamental realisation that I seek to instil in my student researchers—that their research matters, that work with any “human subjects”, and especially vulnerable populations such as refugees, has an impact and thus carries with it a willingness to accept that responsibility, as you better understand your relationships to the other people involved in our research project.



## References

- Clark-Kazak, Christina. 2017. "Ethical Considerations: Research With People in Situations of Forced Migration." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33, no. 2 (August): 11–7. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043059ar>.
- European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. 2020. "Guidance Note - Research on Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migrants." [https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/guide\\_research-refugees-migrants\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/guide_research-refugees-migrants_en.pdf).
- Fraser, Sandy / Lewis, Vicky / Ding, Sharon / Kellet, Mary / Robinson, Chris eds. 2004. *Doing Research with Children and Young People*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Ginwright, Shawn / Cammarota, Julio / Noguera, Pedro. 2006. *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*. Abingdon, England; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goodwin-Gill, Guy. 2014. "The International Law of Refugee Protection." In *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmieh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, Nando Sigona, 36–47. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199652433.001.0001>.
- Hagan, Jennifer. 2021. "The Pitfalls and Potential of Participant-Observation: Ethnographic Enquiry in Volunteering." *Voluntas* (October): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00421-y>.
- Hoffman, Marella. 2019. *Practising Oral History Among Refugees and Host Communities*. Abingdon, England; New York, NY: Routledge.
- Johnson, Brett. 2005. "Overcoming 'Doom and Gloom': Empowering Students in Courses on Social Problems, Injustice, and Inequality." *Teaching Sociology* 33, no. 1 (January): 44–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0092055X0503300104>.
- Kottak, Conrad Phillip. 1982. *Researching American Culture: A Guide for Student Anthropologists (Vol. 10)*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Marino, Elizabeth K. / Faas, A.J. 2020. "Is Vulnerability an Outdated Concept? After Subjects and Spaces." *Annals of Anthropological Practice* 44, no. 1 (February): 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12132>.
- Merry, Sally Engle. 2005. "Anthropology and Activism: Researching Human Rights across Porous Boundaries." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28, no. 2 (November): 240–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24497696>.
- Pennell, Richard. 2017. "Can Historians Capture Refugees' Voices from the Records of Their Applications for Asylum?" *Oral History Australia Journal*, no. 39 (January): 43–54. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.665394794637043>.
- Pinto, N., 2019. *Assessing Perceptions: A Scoping Review of Qualitative Research Tools for Engaging with Vulnerable Populations*. [https://methods.cochrane.org/sites/methods.cochrane.org/equity/files/uploads/e-face\\_scoping\\_review\\_v1\\_pinto.pdf](https://methods.cochrane.org/sites/methods.cochrane.org/equity/files/uploads/e-face_scoping_review_v1_pinto.pdf).
- Ramsay, Georgina. 2020. "Humanitarian Exploits: Ordinary Displacement and the Political Economy of the Global Refugee Regime." *Critique of Anthropology* 40, no. 1 (March): 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0308275X19840417>.
- Robertson, Jennifer. 2002. "Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on Positionality." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 4 (Autumn): 785–92. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3318171>.
- Sherrod, Lonnie R. / Flanagan, Constance A. / Kassimir, Ron. 2006. *Youth Activism: An International Encyclopaedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Slater, David H / O'Day, Robin / Fulco, Flavia / Albazerbashi, Noor. 2020. "16.2 Digital Oral Narrative Research in Japan: An Engaged Approach." In *Studying Japan*, edited by Nora Kottmann, Cornelia Reiher, 446–9. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos.
- Stewart, Omer C. 1983. "Historical Notes about Applied Anthropology in the United States." *Human Organization* 42, no. 3 (Fall): 189–94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44126001>.
- Tax, Sol. 1975. "Action Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (December): 514–7. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2741627>.
- Van Willigen, John. 2002. *Applied Anthropology: An Introduction*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

AYANO SOMA

## **Positionality in student research with an African refugee: Negotiating successful interviewing through student mentoring as *senpai***

Having been born in Japan, raised by Japanese parents, and attended local Japanese schools, I grew up in a homogeneous environment. When I started understanding English and consuming Western media around the age of 13, I was astonished by the difference in media representation. Seeing a positive portrayal of various socially sensitive issues that I was used to seeing portrayed in a negative light in Japanese media, I learned to be critical of the norms presented in media discourse. I came to wish to study society and culture to find out why the same issues can be perceived so differently across the world and what influences the dynamics of social relations for the population.

In March of 2021, the death of a Sri Lankan woman in an immigration-detention centre hit the headlines in the country. The subsequent investigation revealed that the detainee, who was ordered to be deported after overstaying, died in her cell after being denied proper medical care (Jozuka 2021). The incident sparked the public's interest in the national immigration system and the inhumane treatment of those detained. I began to learn that the acceptance rate of refugees is significantly lower in Japan than in other nations of the Global North, leading to a large and increasing collection of detainees who could not return to their home country for fear of persecution. However, there was a sheer lack of representation of the voices of those concerned in the media; when their stories were told at all, they were predominantly told by somebody else.

Around the same time, in my last year at Sophia University, I came across a student-led digital oral narrative project supervised by David Slater that aims at joining the voice of a population that is not always depicted accurately in the media. It was a perfect opportunity for me to apply the theoretical knowledge and other research skills I had acquired during my years as an undergraduate student in the field that I came to see as a gap that needed to be filled. Without much further understanding of the legal framework and the reality of refugees and asylum seekers or developed methodological skills in interviewing, I decided to join the research.

The student-led research project revolves around a group of students working with an informant over the course of a semester, trying to find the best way to help the refugee narrator tell their story in their own words. By the end of the semester, we curate the collected data in writing and interview clips for the presentation on the project's website<sup>1</sup>. In the spring semester of 2021, when I first took part in the oral-narrative research, we had the opportunity to narrate the stories of two refugees: Yasser from Syria and Nahed from Tunisia. I was in the group of four undergraduate students interviewing Yasser and joined him in voicing his story of growing up under Assad's regime<sup>2</sup>.

### Research dynamics, Japanese style

Shortly after the semester ended, I was offered the position of teaching assistant by David Slater for the following autumn semester of 2021. Wishing to resume my research with refugees and asylum seekers in Japan, I jumped at the opportunity to return to the project, this time with responsibility as a *senpai* (senior) student overseeing the progress of the *kōhai* (junior) students. This resembled the *zemi* (seminar) style common in Japan, where the seniors guide their juniors as they also participate in the project themselves. It is a structurally inherent part of the way students relate to each other all over Japan, with the expectation of mentoring from the top and willingness to receive support from below. Although in the English-speaking Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University, the age hierarchy is less taken into account and *san* is seldom used to address an older student, the students recognized me as a *senpai* by calling me Ayano-san from the first day, even when communicating in English. Such a *senpai-kōhai* relationship created a sense of closeness and it was developed through in-class mentoring and out-of-class meetings, which often started with code-switching from casually chatting in Japanese to working on the project in English. Closeness, intimacy and trust established in the positionality of *senpai* and *kōhai* were highly beneficial parts of the student experience as researchers.

In an international program such as ours and a highly multicultural research team, co-operation is not something we could take for granted. One might expect that such differences among members could result in friction. However, a study conducted on culturally diverse work groups found that multicultural teams have higher team satisfaction than monocultural teams (Stahl et al. 2009, 702–3). The same study also revealed that groups with cul-

1 <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/>

2 <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/growing-up-under-assads-regime/>

tural diversity in personalities, values and attitudes showed more effectiveness in communication than groups with diversity in gender or age (Harrison / Prince / Bell 1998, 98; Stahl et al. 2009, 703). While this sort of diversity might be taken for granted at programs in the US or Europe, in Japan this is an unusual situation, but in our case, diversity was surely our strength. The different experiences and dispositions each student brought fused into one goal of joining the voice of the narrator through extensive and rather intense communication. In the end, many students commented that the project was the most rewarding experience in their undergraduate years.

### Preliminary research—the refugee situation in Japan

The first challenge for each semester was to address the fact that the participating students did not have prior experience in conducting research in refugee studies or awareness of the actual global or domestic refugee situation in Japan. The lack of knowledge among the students is partially attributed to the low level of refugee recognition and the small population of African asylum seekers in Japan. Out of 6,150 applications processed in 2021, only 65 people were recognized as refugees by the Japanese government, the majority of which were from Myanmar, China and Afghanistan (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2022). Thus, it was a task for the *senpai* researchers to facilitate students' understanding of the narrator's complex story of persecution and forced displacement while guiding them in the methods of ethnographic interviewing.

The narrator, who shall remain nameless in this article to respect her wish for privacy, was born in a major African country. Coming from a relatively wealthy background, she and her siblings received a good education and had jobs such as government officials, teachers and engineers. The narrator herself obtained a degree in business and was working as an accountant until she was forced to leave the country after experiencing discrimination at work due to her political support for the democratic movement. She came to Japan through a contact in the early 2010s and has stayed since then under a non-permanent visa called Designated Activities (*tokutei katsudō*), which is valid for up to five years and renewable upon screening. She applied for refugee recognition a few years after arriving and still awaits hearing the result to this day.

The semester began with preliminary research on the global and national situation that surrounds refugees in preparation for the interviews. The students spend the first couple of weeks annotating and discussing the fundamental refugee sources; in particular, the 1951 Refugee Convention by the United Nations, “The International Law of Refugee Protection” (Goodwin-Gill 2014), “Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced

Migration” (Clark-Kazak 2017) as well as on the legal status of refugee recognition in Japanese law. However, they struggled to identify what needed to be addressed with their own research. For example, when the group decided the first step was to try to untangle the many complicated types and conditions of the different possible visa statuses refugees are eligible for, one enthusiastic student ended up listing all of the types of visas from diplomatic to start-up, almost none of which are relevant to refugees and asylum seekers and thus not of any use to our project. It was evident that most students (in our program and most undergraduates) are well-trained to execute academic tasks when asked, but very few have experience in designing or executing a real project. Through this, the other teaching assistant and I became aware that our role as *senpai* researchers was to lead the students to learn in the sense of gaining a “sense of problem” (*mondai ishiki*) or ability to recognise an issue and generate their own questions before heading off to find the answers.

Another challenge was to teach students to learn to be critical of what is sometimes called *jōshiki* in Japanese (“common sense”), especially when it was supported and propagated by their own governments. For example, they had trouble understanding persecution as the grounds for seeking asylum against a Japanese government discourse that continues to foreground the “fake refugees” (*gisō nanmin*). The word is used to refer to those who apply for refugee recognition for economic advantage despite not facing an imminent threat to life or physical freedom. The Japanese immigration service and politicians have argued for a system that eliminates the so-called *gisō nanmin* to protect genuine refugees (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2003). The problem is that this term is often used to explain and justify the less than 1% recognition rate, dismissing the 99% as somehow “fake refugees” (Japan Association for Refugees 2018). Hence, we allocated more time to discuss the co-existence of economic interest and fear of persecution, and the government’s often opportunistic use of the argument that appears to reflect academic research, when in fact, it is more often little more than a political agenda. The negotiation of these many “shades of grey” is a skill that most undergraduates are only starting to learn, but is necessary for their development as they begin their own research.

## Interviewing—training, trial and error

The next stage was analysing past interviews to generate a theme that would become a focal point for each student. The advantage of devoting time and effort to watching and analysing past interviews is not limited to developing the

plan for the interview that they are to do by themselves. It also is an opportunity for them to become familiar with the personality and the way of communication of the narrator. The first interview with the narrator, which was conducted about three years prior to this semester, made a relatively bad impression on all of us; there was a sense of awkwardness and the narrator was often visibly uncomfortable and impatient with the interviewers. Noticing the tension and nervousness rising among the students, we called for a discussion on the methodological issues that could have been the cause of this awkwardness. Particularly, we paid attention to the phrase the narrator repeatedly used “as I told you” chiding the previous group of students for their repeated asking of the same questions. But we also saw that it was a way for her to keep control of the interview as well as assert her status within the interview setting. It often seemed that the narrator saw the interview as a place for her to educate the students rather than to share her experience.

For the last two years, interviews were conducted online amid the COVID-19 outbreak to reduce physical contact with the narrators, some of whom do not have access to national-health insurance. Although we had adjusted to the new interview environment, we decided to come back face-to-face this semester given the consistently low number of cases and the sensitive character of the narrator, which we concluded was better accommodated in person. In the face-to-face environment, it was even more important to demonstrate our readiness and meticulous preparation was needed.

Despite the efforts put into the preparation, the first interview did not go too well. There was still that sense of awkwardness we recognised in the interview from three years earlier. We immediately held a “reflection meeting” (*hanseikai*) and exchanged views on what went wrong. Including reflective practice in planning and after completing research is crucial to ensuring the vulnerable participant is protected and their needs are addressed (Parajuli / Horey 2021, 4). From a more logistical perspective, we noted that the interview was started in a rush and thus there was no time for the narrator to unwind or for us all to break the ice. The students then suggested that they take about ten minutes before and during the interview to just have a chat with her with some snacks. We implemented the change in the second interview and instantly felt the difference. Providing chances to try, critique and retry their own practice is hugely important for student researchers.

We are always mindful of the ways respect is shown, an issue that is probably especially important when the interviewers are students. Japanese college students, like college students from around the world, are of-

ten quite casual, and our more international cohort might have been even more casual than those at other Japanese universities. Becoming aware of this, the students had to realise the importance of using polite language, demonstrating the degree of their preparation, as well as showing their seriousness and sincerity, in order to give the narrator the respect she deserves and to have a successful interview. The narrator started to show more smiles as the interviews went on and even asked for a group photo after the last interview; the students felt that they had successfully transformed the relationship.

As part of giving students the opportunity to disseminate their research, each semester the class publishes their work on the course website. Of course, few college students can write at the level of peer-reviewed journal articles yet. On the other hand, as students continually reminded David Slater, relatively few people ever read academic journals. As part of recognising the importance of reaching a wider audience with scholarship written in an accessible way, the website gives students a chance to disseminate their work broadly. David Slater and we *senpai* researchers continued to give the students feedback on their working drafts in and out of class, prompting them to polish their writing, develop the structure, improve coherence and make effective use of direct quotations from the interviews. The students eventually completed a piece with which we were all satisfied. However, our feelings of satisfaction were not to be sustained; the final step of getting consent from the narrator to publish her story on our website lay ahead.

### Positionality of students and refugees

One of the most significant findings gained out of the experience with the project was how the positionality of the students is shaped by the positionality of the narrator. How the research takes place, and in particular, how the immediate context of the interview takes place, often depends on how the narrator sees themselves, which is not only a function of their personality but also a function of their position in a broader social and political context. The implication of the positionality for the power differential between the researchers and the vulnerable participant must be taken into account, especially when the participants are refugees coming from situations of crisis (Mackenzie / McDowell / Pittaway 2007, 301–302), and currently in situations of marginalisation and legal precariousness. Our task as *senpai* researchers was to alert the students to understand the dynamics and adjust their practice accordingly.



One of the contexts that formed the positionality of the narrator we worked with in the fall semester of 2021 was her loss of social and economic status. Despite the narrator's educational and professional background and a visa that permits her to work, she has faced difficulties in finding employment. Facing rejection in job opportunities as soon as she tells them of her refugee-application status, she has had no choice but to make a living by making beds in a hotel, washing dishes in a restaurant, and sorting packages in a delivery station. She describes, "I feel so bad doing this kind of job because I did not study to do this. [The job is] just for survival". Like many refugees and asylum seekers who had white-collar jobs in their home country, she has experienced rather dramatic downward mobility (Gans 2009, 1659). It should also be noted that being an African female refugee in Japan meant that she was triply marginalised due to her race and gender in addition to her economic status, as commonly seen among female refugees who resettle in developed nations (Goodkind / Deacon 2004, 724). It took some time for the students to recognise the dynamics between the narrator, who is experiencing multiple layers of marginalisation, and themselves, who are a racial and class majority at a private university.

This situation was probably more pronounced for the Japanese students in the class. As the policies and actions of the Japanese immigration system are integral to the project, the Japanese students would at times feel responsible to represent "the Japanese perspective" or be apologetic to the narrator for the negative experience they may have had in Japan. This was also observed the other way around. Not infrequently, during the interview, narrators would also address the Japanese-looking students and apologise before expressing their negative view on something about the country, "I am sorry to say this but the Japanese..." and sometimes even "you Japanese..." Although the sense of guilt created some awkwardness, it became a good opportunity to realise that where the narrator stands in Japanese society affects where the students studying at a Japanese university stand in research.

While the socioeconomic and racial differences contributed to the complexity and difficulty she had in Japan and we had in our own research, our interviews with her revealed that it was the structural and legal sort of precariousness that was the most important factor for her. Our interviews were often focused on exactly these factors in ways that often touched upon sensitive aspects. Due to this material, the narrator began to feel that the narrative she provided was too revealing of her own situation. In the end, after hours



of interviews and weeks of hard work by the students, the narrator made the difficult decision not to have her story published out of her concern over the potential risk the publicity might bring. We tried to remove those more sensitive parts of the narrative but as we did, the narrative as a whole began to fall apart, so integral were these aspects to her story. She still has a refugee application pending and felt that any sort of publication could have negative effects on the review of her case. She expressed regret for this choice, but we all agreed that there was no way to move forward; the safety of narrators must also come before any scholarly goals that might be driving the project. Needless to say, this was unfortunate news to all members of the team who have dedicated so many hours of work to the project. Nevertheless, it was a reminder that in real research, the outcomes are often unpredictable. More importantly, it taught us the vulnerability of refugees, or any vulnerable population, to a possible adverse consequence of participation in academic research.

### **Moving forward**

Even after a year since I first joined the research, I continue to play a part in the project. As the course was not offered in the spring semester of 2022, I have been involved in the behind-the-stage work at the moment; that is to say, the management of the website and the translation of the published results and clips from the interviews. As a Japanese national, I have come to gain a sense of scholarly duty to let the voices of refugees and asylum seekers in Japan be heard in Japanese as well. Although the progress has been slow, we now have the stories of three of our seven narrators available in Japanese, with more on the way.

My aspiration continues to develop. It was the eagerness to fill the gap in the media representation and reality of refugees' lives by documenting the raw voices of the people that motivated me to engage in the project. I found another gap that needs to be filled: the gap between the situation judged by the state and the reality experienced by the individual. I came to the realisation that I needed to study policy to truly understand how such gaps are created in society and how they could be bridged. I was fortunate to have an opportunity to start an MSc programme in international social and public policy of migration at a graduate program in the United Kingdom. I am confident that my experience as a student researcher through this project will be an invaluable asset moving forward.

## References

- Clark-Kazak, Christina. 2017. "Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33, no. 2 (August): 11–7. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043059ar>.
- Gans, Herbert J. 2009. "First Generation Decline: Downward Mobility Among Refugees and Immigrants." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 9 (October): 1658–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870903204625>.
- Goodkind, Jessica R. / Deacon, Zermarie. 2004. "Methodological Issues in Conducting Research with Refugee Women: Principles for Recognizing and Re-Centering the Multiply Marginalized." *Journal of Community Psychology* 32, no. 6 (November): 721–39. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20029>.
- Goodwin-Gill, Guy. 2014. "The International Law of Refugee Protection." In *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasimiyeh / Gil Loescher / Katy Long / Nando Sigona, 36–47, Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199652433.001.0001>.
- Harrison, David A. / Prince, Kenneth H. / Bell, Myrtle P. 1998. "Beyond Relational Demography: Time and the Effects of Surface- and Deep-Level Diversity on Work Group Cohesion." *The Academy of Management Journal* 41, no. 1 (February): 96–107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/256901>.
- Immigration Services Agency of Japan 出入国在留管理庁. 2003. "Nanmin ninteiseido ni kansuru kentō kekka (saishu hōkoku)" 難民認定制度に関する検討結果 (最終報告) [The result of consideration regarding the refugee-recognition system (Final report)]. <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/930002454.pdf>.
- Immigration Services Agency of Japan 出入国在留管理庁. 2022. "Reiwa 3 nen ni okeru nanmin ninteisha sū nado ni tsuite" 令和3年における難民認定者数等について [About the number of recognized refugees and such in 2021]. <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001372236.pdf>.
- Japan Association for Refugees 難民支援協会. 2018. "Nihon ni kuru nowa 'gisou nanmin' bakari nanoka? Nanmin ninteiseido, nenkan wazuka sū jū mei no datōsei wo kangaeru" 日本に来るのは「偽装難民」ばかりなのか? 難民認定、年間わずか数十名の妥当性を考える [Is it all 'fake refugees' who come to Japan? Considering the validity of only dozens of people per year]. [https://www.refugee.or.jp/report/refugee/2018/02/japan\\_recog18/](https://www.refugee.or.jp/report/refugee/2018/02/japan_recog18/).
- Jozuka, Emiko. 2021. "Her Dream to Teach English in Japan Ended with a Lesson for the Country." *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/04/asia/japan-immigration-detention-wishma-death-hnk-intl-dst/index.html>.
- Mackenzie, Catriona / McDowell, Christopher / Pittaway, Eileen. 2007. "Beyond 'Do No Harm': The Challenge of Constructing Ethical Relationships in Refugee Research." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (May): 299–319. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem008>.
- Parajuli, Jamuna / Horey, Dell. 2022. "Reflections on Researching Vulnerable Populations: Lessons from a Study with Bhutanese Refugee Women." *Nursing Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (April): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12443>.
- Stahl, Günter K. / Maznevski, Martha L. / Voigt, Andreas / Jonsen, Karsten. 2009. "Unraveling the Effects of Cultural Diversity in Teams: A Meta-Analysis of Research on Multicultural Work Groups." *Journal of International Business Studies* 41 (November): 690–709. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jibs.2009.85>.



THAW TAR

## Shifting perspectives under political stress: Interviewing Burmese students stranded in Japan

### Studying refugees

In my third year at university, I was doing a student-led research project about refugee issues of Japan in an anthropology class, working on the stories of a Nigerian who fled his home country to escape persecution, seeking refuge in Japan. The research experience taught me about the global and domestic treatment of refugees in crisis, as well as about the questionable nature of how Japan handles issues pertaining to forced migration; it also developed my interest in anthropology and oral narratives as a research approach. One year later, after there was a military coup back in my home country Myanmar, my positionality switched very quickly. In an effort to document the persecution of my own people, I began to work on the stories of five native Burmese students who were studying at Japanese universities, focusing on their experiences with the coup and its impacts on their lives in Myanmar and in Japan. The shifting of my positionality in these two projects has not only expanded my knowledge as a researcher by placing me in the position of a “native anthropologist” (something I had never heard of until that time), but made me reflect upon my previous experience with the Nigerian informant. I found myself transformed from an ardent student researcher to a fully engaged native anthropologist, researching in equal parts for political activism and academic scholarship.

As someone who grew up in a poor country ruled for decades by military regimes, my young and naive self imagined Japan as a developed and wealthy country, advanced not only in economy and technology, but in how it handles issues of social justice as well. I imagined every Japanese person to be aware of racial inequality, political instability around the globe, and the importance of self-rule and democracy, amongst others. As I continued my learning journey in Japan and in Japanese Studies, I eventually understood that after all Japan is as fraught as other countries. After taking the Digital Oral Narratives class taught by David Slater in my third year, I realised the importance of educating myself about forced migration and refugee issues in Japan.

Working on Gabriel's stories has enlightened me about how far behind Japan is in protecting human rights compared to other developed countries. Gabriel is a Nigerian who came to Japan on a tourist visa in the early 1990s. One day, a terrorist group, Boko Haram, made accusations against his book on Christianity for offending their religious views, and a *fatwā* was issued against him, a threat of death if he ever returned home. Gabriel applied for refugee recognition in Japan, but he was rejected. Watching the video clips of Gabriel's past interviews and learning about his struggles applying for refugee status over the past three decades only to be rejected every single time, I was dumbstruck and frustrated. Even now, he is living in fear of being detained and deported by the Japanese government, whose transparency about decision-making has always been questionable (Japan Association of Refugees n.d.). Later on when I interviewed him myself and got to know him better, I found myself questioning why Japan fails to protect vulnerable people like Gabriel. In addition to the endless bureaucracy, refugee applicants in Japan have no rights to health-care insurance. They may or may not be given a work-permit, depending on how lucky they are. There are refugee-support organisations, but as long as the government does not give a proper status to Gabriel and does not help him survive the statelessness and social stigmas in Japan, Gabriel's future is hopeless. This is a Japanese Studies that is different from what I once imagined when I began my study in college, but maybe a more urgent study.

## Becoming displaced (myself)

A semester after working together with my group to tell Gabriel's stories<sup>1</sup>, my understanding of Japan's refugee issues became much more personal. In February 2021, there was a military coup in Myanmar, my home country, moving my own feelings from sympathy (for someone I felt bad for) to empathy (being able to identify myself in the same situation as another). The democratically elected government was overthrown by the military junta, which has a long history of exploiting the country's politics and economy exclusively for their own benefit while at the same time suppressing any form of democratic movement. The moment I heard the appalling news, I was speechless, confused and frustrated because all I could feel was that the cynical nature of Myanmar's political history and its destructive impacts on people's lives were about to repeat once again. Since 1962, successive military dictatorships have constantly violated the human rights of its own people. The majority Bamar ethnic group is favoured by the government, causing many ethnic minorities to suffer from large-scale marginalisation and the various armed conflicts initiated by the mil-

<sup>1</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapan.net/wordpress.com/narrators/gabriel/>

itary (South / Lall 2016b, 3; Nicholson 2014, 1). Growing up in the conflict-free zone of the Mandalay region, I was blind to these atrocities. I was only awakened from my ignorance after years of unlearning the ideas that were instilled by the education system propagandised by the military government.

As a student living in Japan, although my study of Gabriel's situation brought the injustices that refugees like him face to light. At the same time, after what happened in Myanmar, I am also aware that I am most fortunate to be in a relatively safe and secure country, Japan. Although my plan was always to return to Myanmar after graduation, I am now caught in a dilemma of whether to return or stay. I discovered that the political crisis had disrupted the plans of other Burmese students as well. Many of us had dreams of returning to Myanmar in the near future to build upon an increasingly prosperous national economy and stable political system. Now, this dream seems impossible to realise. As the military's persecutions against anyone either at home or abroad who challenges the junta have only intensified over the past year, our dilemma continues. As a fellow student positioned in a similar situation, I decided to conduct research focusing on the stories of five university students from Myanmar who were studying in Japan while they (and I) helplessly watched the situation back home unfold into violent turmoil.

Various themes were explored in this research project. By asking the informants about their backgrounds, I was able to understand the motives behind their choice of Japan rather than other countries to study. I asked them about their political and educational experiences in Myanmar and in Japan to understand how their views and feelings had changed as they went from enjoying the privileges of overseas study to facing the prospect of never being able to return home. Most importantly, I tried to identify any impacts—both physical and emotional—the recent coup had had on them and examine how their hopes and future goals had been disrupted due to the impact of the coup. I myself was a digital activist and got quite involved in the creation and dissemination of information about the coup among other Burmese at home and in Japan. While I still see this work as important, I also came to believe that one way to address the dire situation in Myanmar is to use my scholarly training to document and amplify the voices of the Burmese community in Japan and to spread awareness about my home country to the world.

## **Context behind the dilemmas**

To better comprehend the political context my informants were in, I kept myself updated through previously published scholarly works as well as reports by the mass media. I found that the personal stories of my narrators

were very intertwined with the geopolitics and, like myself, my narrators were closely monitoring the events in the regions they come from, where they had family and friends. More than a year had passed since the coup when we began the research, and the ongoing conflict continues to cause displacements within and beyond the borders. In the regions where opposition groups had impressively resisted, the military used heavy weapons to target the entire area, setting civilians' homes on fire, killing innocent people, and thus causing many residents to flee to camps for internally displaced persons (Dominguez 2022). Meanwhile in big cities, the military regime uses state surveillance and various forms of violence to crackdown on the resistance movements. Many civilians have been imprisoned, tortured and killed. As of July 2022, 2,092 civilians had been killed and more than 10,000 had been detained (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners 2022). The number is still rising as the military launches more attacks on civilians to suppress their resistance and consolidate its power. Chances for the country to transition into a more inclusive, economically developed and globally competent nation have been replaced by more discrimination against the ethnic minority population, nationwide poverty and a series of future uncertainties for people both at home and abroad.

As a Burmese living in Japan and observing Japan's response since the first day of the coup, my narrators were all hoping that Japan would take rapid and impactful actions against the Myanmar military junta. However, the Japanese government refused to impose sanctions against the Myanmar military or to suspend the existing infrastructure projects operated under the agreement of the two governments (Dominguez 2021). Additionally, the Japanese government continues to accept Myanmar military personnel and provide them with training through a joint program established in 2015 (Kasai 2022). All these actions of Japan have raised both questions and suspicions. Some of my informants mentioned in the interviews that they were shocked about the position of Japan as a democratic nation that refused to more fully support the pro-democratic civilians on the ground. Others pointed out that this refusal was in part the result of wanting to protect large amounts of commercial investment and oversees development aid. For them, the government of the place that they once felt welcome and secure in has betrayed them, and changed the way they thought about their own place in Japan.

Eventually, Japan issued some Designated Activities visas for Burmese residents who felt that they could not return to Myanmar. Under the new visa which comes with a work permit, they are allowed to stay and work in Japan from six

months to one year. As of December 2021, there were 2,889 Myanmar nationals who applied for refugee status in Japan, and 1,730 of them were granted the Designated Activities visa (Immigration Services Agency of Japan 2022). The Designated Activities visa with a work permit seems to be a reasonable solution for the time being for students like my informants and myself. Nevertheless, as a democratic nation, presumably Japan could do better to support the civilians of Myanmar. As one of the informants described it, “The UN tried—they had emergency meetings and everything. And there were a lot of countries that condemned the coup, but they couldn’t really do anything because it’s internal affairs. Japan is also one of them. I feel like none of the countries tried their best”.

As the crisis continued, my narrators’ views of their own situation changed. The narrators kept their goal of someday returning to Myanmar to help it rebuild but they felt that they could not yet return to Myanmar. With the university-level education the informants have acquired in Japan, presumably, it is rather manageable for them to pursue good jobs without returning to Myanmar and without resorting to the refugee-status application. Internationally educated young people like the informants will always be of great help to build a better future for Myanmar. And yet, we discovered that the informants were strongly attached to Myanmar because it is the only place that they consider home, usually as linked to the idea that home is where family is. We also learnt that the informants often associated their definition of home with their hopes for Myanmar as a nation. As they verbalised their emotional attachments towards their family and the country, they revealed their hopes for the return of democracy, which is the only way that they see themselves with any future in Myanmar. As the situation in Myanmar shows no sign of improving, many of the students are losing the hope they had. This loss of hope also describes my own situation.

### **Walking through “native anthropology”**

I never had any knowledge of native anthropology until I started preparing to conduct interviews on people from my own community. Native anthropologists, as defined by Narayan (1993, 671), are those who “are believed to write about their own cultures from a position of intimate affinity”. As a native student anthropologist, I found it both convenient and challenging to interview my informants. Highly interested in political and social issues and having been personally affected by a severe political crisis, I was eager to learn not only about the general views and observations of my informants on Myanmar, but about the diversity of their personal experiences with the coup.



Logistically, I discovered that my experience aligns with the argument made by Forster (2012, 18) who stated that communicative competence serves as an essential tool in establishing trust and mutual understanding between the native anthropologist and the informant. My status as a native speaker of Burmese and a compatriot helped me establish trust, making the informants comfortable enough to share their stories with me, something that is a substantial concern when most of us suspected surveillance and feared retribution for any political engagement or even social-media critique. Another advantage of being a native anthropologist is that my knowledge on Myanmar's history, culture, language and politics enables me to generate analysis from an insider's perspective. Forster (2012, 18–19) stated that a native anthropologist's knowledge helps him or her to analyse the data more meaningfully. Compared to Gabriel's interviews, in the interviews that I did with the Burmese students, I was more emotionally involved too. This made it easier for me not only to connect and resonate with their experiences, but to fully grasp the messages that they were trying to convey.

One particular disadvantage of being a native anthropologist is that there were times when they forgot to mention a detail and I neglected to ask about it because I felt I knew what they wanted to say. Shared but assumed knowledge is important. Yet the most ideal way of telling the story in ethnographic interviewing and oral narrative research is through key quotations from the narrator. This never occurred to me as a problem during the interview, but during the writing process, especially when the neglected detail could play a crucial part in telling a compelling story, I realised the problem. There were times when this detail was lacking in my recording because I had assumed it. Another noteworthy drawback was lack of objectivity during the interviews. Without this objectivity, I tended to frame answers and make associations in ways that I had assumed were relevant. I did not always seek clarifications about their opinions involving the complex Myanmar situation, instead relying on my own knowledge as a fellow Burmese student. I later realised that even if my assumptions were probably correct, direct questions were necessary for such a piece of research in oral narratives. I found it interesting that one of the basic tenets of anthropology is that no one, including native anthropologists, can be objective in interpreting and evaluating social phenomena due to the mind-sets influenced by the society one is in (Jones 1970, 256). Reflecting upon my research experience, I discovered that either as a non-native or native anthropologist, it was impossible to remain objective the entire time. As a non-native anthropologist, I found it challenging not to make any

assumptions or judgements about Gabriel's motives behind the refugee-status application whereas as a native anthropologist, I found it difficult not to imagine myself as one of the Burmese informants.

As a way to address some of these disadvantages, I co-interviewed with another researcher in the project, one who was still in the process of familiarising herself with Myanmar's political context. After a period of trial and error, we decided that during each of the two-hour-long interviews, my co-researcher would focus on talking to the informants as the main interviewer while I took notes, paid attention to the flow of the interview, and asked follow-up questions. The method allowed both of us to have more freedom in asking questions for clarification; it also provided the informants with a better guide as to how much information they should provide. I noticed that they were as comfortable sharing their personal information with my co-researcher as they were with me. We initially decided to conduct the interviews in English since the informants had a high level of competency in English and since the eventual article would be published in English. The only downside of working with a non-Burmese co-researcher to conduct interviews in English was that some of the informants were not able to express themselves as fully in English as they could in Burmese, and naturally, misunderstanding occurred. To resolve the issue, some informants resorted to code-switching especially when they could not find an equivalent in English to explain complicated political and cultural matters.

## **Confidentiality and contributions**

Due to the sensitive positionality of the Burmese narrators amid the ongoing crisis, the most challenging obstacle in this research project is to protect the privacy and identity of the informants. Their first reaction when I approached them was that they would agree to participate provided that there was absolute confidentiality. During the interviews, there were times when they revealed some sensitive personal information. Immediately afterwards, they explained that the purpose was to give the interviewers a context, stipulating that we not use the information for the article. During the writing process, even after using pseudonyms and leaving all the traceable information behind, I found myself anxious because any mistake I made could expose my informants' identity, which could eventually bring threats to their families, themselves or their future. As a researcher of this project and a Burmese student myself, I also could be targeted for creating, publicising and circulating contents that undermine the military's attempt to consolidate its power. By participating in the project, I am putting my future and my family in Myan-

mar at risk—I might be banned from entering the country in the future, and my family might become victims of arbitrary arrests and torture in prison. It is for this reason that I use a pseudonym.

Despite these risks, I feel that there is an urgent need to tell this story through systematic scholarly research. My current position as a student abroad and student researcher enables me to contribute through both political activism and scholarly research despite the potential dangers. Seeing that the situation in Myanmar is increasingly exacerbated by the military's atrocities, I would like to apply the expertise and skills that I have gained from being a student researcher at Sophia University. While my own research is very local, in fact, there are young people all over the world who are part of the Burmese diaspora facing similar situations. I have been accepted into a graduate programme outside of Japan, where I hope to expand my knowledge and acquire more advanced research skills, in hopes of pursuing a research-orientated career in an international organisation one day.

## References

- Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. 2022. "Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup." Accessed July 20, 2022. <https://aappb.org/?p=22359>.
- Dominguez, Gabriel. 2021. "Japan's Refusal to Sanction Myanmar Undermines Biden's Strategy." *The Japan Times*, June 20, 2021. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2021/06/20/national/politics-diplomacy/japan-sanction-myanmar-biden-strategy/>.
- Dominguez, Gabriel. 2022. "Myanmar Junta 'Rapidly Losing Strength,' but Rights Abuses Continue, U.N. Rapporteur Says." *The Japan Times*, April 25, 2022. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2022/04/25/asia-pacific/tom-andrews-myanmar-interview/>.
- Forster, Abby. 2012. "We Are All Insider-Outsiders: A Review of Debates Surrounding Native Anthropology." *Student Anthropologist* 3, no. 1: 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.sda2.20120301.0002>.
- Immigration Services Agency of Japan 出入国在留管理庁. 2022. "Reiwa 3 nen ni okeru nanmin ninteisha sū nado ni tsuite" 令和3年における難民認定者数等について [About the number of recognized refugees and such in 2021]. <https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001372236.pdf>.
- Japan Association of Refugees. n.d. "Refugees in Japan." Accessed Aug 6, 2022. <https://www.refugee.or.jp/en/refugee/>.
- Jones, Delmos J. 1970. "Towards a Native Anthropology." *Human Organization* 29, no. 4 (Winter): 251–9. <https://doi.org/10.17730/humo.29.4.717764244331m4qv>.
- Kasai, Teppei. 2022. "Japan to Train New Cadets, Officers from Abusive Myanmar Military." *Human Rights Watch*, April 27, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/27/japan-train-new-cadets-officers-abusive-myanmar-military>.
- Narayan, Kirin. 1993. "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95, no. 3: 671–86. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.3.02a00070>.
- Nicholson, Demetrios J. 2014. "The Tatmadaw and Human Rights: Changing a Military Mindset." <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1045230.pdf>.
- South, Ashley / Lall, Marie-Carine. 2016. "Schooling and Conflict: Ethnic Education and Mother Tongue-Based Teaching in Myanmar." <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/a9323335-eab1-36c7-9dde-ef6697a1d8e3/SchoolingConflictENG.pdf>.

MEGUMI FAITH MALLARI

## Understanding vulnerabilities virtually: Oral narrative research on a Syrian refugee amid the COVID-19 pandemic

### Research for and with support

Growing up as *nikkei* in the Philippines, I was surrounded by many other people of Japanese descent. But to me, being a fractional Japanese was merely something that added to my identity as a Filipino. My first name is Japanese, I have family in Japan and would often come to visit them, but I admittedly did not spend as much time pondering my relationship with the country itself. I was firmly rooted in my Filipino identity and seeing first-hand the struggles faced by my fellow Filipinos, I spent more time organising with my classmates to try and support underprivileged populations in our city, Davao, in our capacity as students. At the same time, I saw how my mother frequently went on interview trips around the country to gather information on persons of Japanese descent who were left by their Japanese parents in the Philippines after the Second World War and were at risk of statelessness because they were neither Filipinos nor recognized Japanese—the population covered in the 2021 *UNHCR Philippines' Report on Populations at Risk of Statelessness*<sup>1</sup>. When I came to university in Tōkyō, this experience sparked my interest in statelessness and forced migration in Japan.

Upon entering Sophia University, I became part of Sophia Refugee Support Group (SRSG<sup>2</sup>), the support arm of Refugee Voices Japan<sup>3</sup>. Established in 2017, students who took this research course realised that collecting oral narratives is just the beginning—the refugees that they were interviewing were not only sources of data but were individuals who needed much support but were given little to none in Japan. I quickly learned that most asylum seekers stay here in Japan under what is called “provisional release”, a precarious status that leaves them without insurance or the ability to work (Tamura 2020; see Footnote 3). My *senpai* or “senior students” established the student organisation not only to raise awareness about the plight of refugees in Japan

1 <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/wp-content/uploads/sites/28/2021/04/Surge-Capacity-Project-Desk-Review.pdf>

2 <https://refugeevoicesjapan.net/wordpress.com/sophia-refugee-support-group/>

3 <https://refugeevoicesjapan.net/wordpress.com/>

through social media<sup>4</sup>, seminars and presentations at high schools, but also to provide support and friendship to refugees. SRSG hosts cafes where the refugees come to our university monthly to chat and have fun together, co-ordinates detention centre visits, accompanies refugees to their visa renewals at the immigration centre and hospital check-ups, teaches Japanese, translates asylum application documents to Japanese and researches background information for asylum applications.

During my second year, I took over leadership for SRSG just as COVID-19 hit—when the vulnerability of our refugee friends intensified. As Parajuli and Horey (2021) note, the nature of a refugee’s vulnerability is constantly changing and dependent on political policy that often dictates societal structures. There is no singular experience of being a refugee: they are affected by varying issues at varying stages of their journeys that could intensify, abate or shift their chronic vulnerability. In a high-income country like Japan, this “vulnerability” is defined by Mendola, Parroco and Li Donni (2020) as the “multidimensional risk of experiencing negative outcomes” characterised by social isolation, lack of access to healthcare, and financial difficulties that refugees are subjected to as they start a new life in the asylum country. Lacking reliable and up-to-date data publicly available data, we collect our own data to more accurately target support, especially given the lack of state-led assistance to asylum seekers. Leading the support arm of the refugee project gave me a level of understanding of the relationship between research and support and the importance of bridging these two together.

I joined the research arm of the project during my third year as part of a team of four undergraduates and worked on the narrative of Yasser<sup>5</sup>, a Syrian refugee in Tōkyō. Having had experience interacting with refugees prior to participating in the research was immensely helpful for me, as I had some degree of understanding of their vulnerabilities. This research was an enriching experience that opened my eyes to the true severity and complexity of the experiences of those forced to flee, and it fuelled my efforts to explore and understand what I can do in my position as a student, acting as both scholar and supporter for vulnerable populations.

### **Yasser: adapting to new roles**

Born and raised in Syria as the eldest son of a father who worked as a professional chef in Qatar and a mother who was an executive in the media industry, Yasser lived a comfortable life growing up. He was a devout Muslim who was

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/sophia.srsg/?hl=en>

<sup>5</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapan.net/wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/>

free to exercise his faith while acquiring a top-level education, studying English literature at Damascus University. He was also a national-level soccer player.

Yasser grew up under the Assad regime<sup>6</sup> and in 2013 was forced to flee when the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, with some 16,000 people killed within a year (BBC 2012). His family situation was threatened due to his mother's job in the media sector and her open dissent against the regime. Yasser's house was destroyed in a bombing raid, leaving them with no choice but to flee Syria, first seeking safety in neighbouring Egypt and Lebanon, where life was unsustainable. Afterwards, they applied to seek asylum in European countries but were rejected. Yasser had family in Japan and found seeking asylum here to be their last resort, affirming what Van Hear (2014, 5) noted: that social networks are some of the most important resources for refugees. With his father still working in Qatar, Yasser, his mother and his younger sister arrived in Japan in October 2013. After months of interviews and document submissions and two years of waiting for a decision, they were among the mere 27 who were recognised among the 7,586 people who applied for refugee recognition in Japan in 2015 (Reuters 2016). Yasser had to put aside his personal ambitions of becoming a soccer player, and his university education was put on hold. At 21, he was working multiple jobs and became his family's sole breadwinner in this new country.

Under the guidance of our project supervisor and the support of our *senpai* researchers, our group conducted research by analysing pre-existing interviews, coded the transcripts into thematic sections and began our interviews. (Our final work can be found here: Yasser's Main Page<sup>7</sup>. My two sections focused on Yasser's journey<sup>8</sup> from Syria to being recognised as a refugee in Japan and his reformed perspective<sup>9</sup> on "home".)

## Interviewing vulnerable populations

Research that involves vulnerable populations is ethically challenging and practically complex (Parajuli / Horey 2021) and this is only compounded by the oral narrative format that relies on the narrator's willingness to share deeply personal lived experiences on video. With this in mind, we prepared for our interviews with Yasser anticipating two vulnerabilities: his refugee experiences fleeing Syria and his struggles in seeking asylum in Japan. As Parajuli and Horey (2021) note, "refugee populations are often deemed to be vulnerable, because of their difficult and/or traumatic life experiences". Hence,

6 <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/growing-up-under-assads-regime/>

7 <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/>

8 <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/forced-to-a-new-life/>

9 <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/honne-on-home/>

it was crucial that we student researchers understood the ways in which Yasser was vulnerable to ensure his safety and aptly respond to potential issues with him personally and even politically (Loue / Loff 2019).

In this project, we only interview those who have a strong desire to tell their story—and this was certainly the case with Yasser—but we also have to remember that this desire does not negate and sometimes even compounds their vulnerable condition. Wanting to talk and being able to talk is not always the same thing. In prior interviews, we noticed that when talking about certain difficult topics, usually related to the war, he became subdued when bringing up certain topics, sometimes displaying a composure that approached impassiveness. We did not know how to properly react to his deadpan responses. He would bring up these topics but then seemed uncomfortable talking about them. For example, to quote from the interview transcript:

I saw my friend die in front of my eyes. They sniped him. We faced this tear gas. He was being held on someone's shoulder and he was the main one who was shouting and people were shouting after him and stuff and he, he just got sniped, you know (Interview Yasser).

While this data painted a strong picture of his experiences and his choice to flee, it also felt incomplete: for us to write this without fuller explanation and context would probably bring up more questions for readers less familiar with the larger political situation in Syria. From a researcher's point of view, we thought that we needed to follow up on statements made by the narrators not only to tell a complete story but to also show Yasser that we listened and appreciated the significance of what he had chosen to share. On the other hand, we did not want to push Yasser to tell more of his story than he felt comfortable expressing.

We reminded ourselves of his vulnerability and the line, and sometimes conflict, between getting “good” data and unintentionally reinforcing trauma. Yasser has undoubtedly been through a lot, and when working with vulnerable populations we know that it is imperative to avoid sensitive and “potentially re-traumatising” topics (Clark-Kazak 2017, 13) so we decided to not ask follow-up questions on this particular story.

At the beginning of our interviews, we found that Yasser was a bit more hesitant to speak on some topics, even including those he talked freely about before. Initially, we attributed this to different macro-level conditions: his vulnerability related to the challenges he survived in seeking asylum in Japan, particularly during his first six months in the country which he labelled



as “the worst period in my life<sup>10</sup>.” (For someone who had just escaped war-torn Syria, this was arguably quite a claim.) Now that he was among the very few recognised refugees in Japan, it may have crossed his mind to refrain from criticising the government’s asylum policies at the risk of potentially tainting his name to the Japanese readers. (Yasser is now pursuing a career in acting and we wholly understood why he would want a favourable reputation for himself.)

As we went on with our interviews, however, we realised that the causes could also be more closely linked to the immediate interview context: us. We did not know each other well enough at first, and were unsure as to where to strike the balance between being attentive to his story and being respectful of his larger political concerns. He was also unsure, and at different times, would ask us amid the interview, “Is this what you want?” Eventually, I think the innate curiosity that we bring as students coupled with our sensitivity as people coming from more or less the same generation helped us find a comfortable middle ground—one that was appropriately attentive but still respectful. In the end, Yasser gave us some of the most articulate and critical views on the refugee situation in Japan documented on the website<sup>11</sup>. This was the story he wanted to tell us—it just took some time for us to find the best way to ask the right questions to hear his answers.

Manoeuvring through interviews with vulnerable populations may be more manageable for seasoned researchers because they are often in a “position of dominance” (Grant / Mannay / Morgan 2017) and are able to more easily direct the flow of the interview, steering the interviewee and the conversation towards particular topics on the fly (Karnieli-Miller / Strier / Pes-sach 2009). This unequal power dynamic between the researcher and the interviewee arguably structures not only the interview but also the research as a whole, either consciously or unconsciously. Grant et al. (2017) argued that this dominant power relation could be problematic, as it could skew the outcome of the research’s narrative to fit a preconceived story set by the researcher, making it calculated and formulated as opposed to genuine and expository.

In our case as student researchers, however, the responsibility to understand and deal with their vulnerability is altered by the shifted dynamic between us and the interviewee. With Yasser, we saw the equalisation of power between us, the student research team, and our refugee narrator who was

<sup>10</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/forced-to-a-new-life/#the-first>

<sup>11</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/forced-to-a-new-life/#refugee>



close to our age and had recently graduated from a university that was “equal” to ours. (In Japan, people often gauge status among each other by the relative ranking of their institutional affiliation, in this case, their universities.) In our interviews, Yasser usually dominated the discourse, introducing new topics and managing the depth and focus of the interview as a whole. While to some extent, this could be linked to our lack of experience in interviewing, it was also indicative of his comfort level, something he pointed out directly at different times—noting our proximity in age and similarity of position. But it was not just control of the discourse; it was also a question of depth. Yasser felt able to go into more detail about the sensitive incidents he brought up but did not fully explore in previous interviews, including those with our project supervisor. In this case, our status as younger students was clearly an advantage. This is not to say that our student status was the only factor—Yasser was also more familiar with our whole project, had already secured refugee recognition, and was generally in a more stable and comfortable place in his life. But it is still true that in our interviews, Yasser found a way to give the context and personal perspective he seemed to want, deeper and more intimate than what he shared in previous interviews.

### Interviewing amid a pandemic

This research project was done against the background of the pandemic so all of our interviews with Yasser were conducted through Zoom. We needed to improvise to establish an atmosphere that is usually easier to establish face-to-face. We started our interviews with small talk, asking him about his work on social media, and his TikTok For You page. Again, I think it is an advantage of students as researchers: as we are closer in age to some respondents than senior researchers, we have the ability to easily reference pop culture.

Another key aspect that challenged us in digital interviewing was understanding paralinguistic cues through the screen. In conducting research, it is paramount that the interviewer(s) and interviewee could accurately and immediately read nonverbal cues to ensure effective communication (Ganguly 2018). This goes alongside the concept of *kūki o yomu* that is prevalent in Japanese culture. (Literally “reading the air” is a Japanese expression used to indicate an understanding of the dynamics of a situation without any verbal and explicit explanation.) With a screen between us, our group had to work together to read Yasser’s body language: when he wanted to continue talking, when he wished for us to stop pursuing a topic, or even when he was noticeably speeding through his responses thinking we were in a rush. While there

are ample examples in COVID literature that talk about the difficulty of doing online interviews (e.g., Sah / Singh / Sah 2020), every college student in Japan is arguably quite comfortable in screened communication, even more so after two years of COVID-imposed isolation, and we were able to adapt relatively easily. In fact, in some ways, it was easier for us, and for Yasser, to do the interviews online, at times allowing him a bit of distance that proved productive, especially in the discussion of sensitive topics.

We always interview in groups—with two to four interviewers. In face-to-face interviews, researchers in our project communicate with each other by tapping each other's legs under the table or making eye contact to signal that it is time to move on to another question. But because we were physically away from one another, we instead utilised a variety of alternative forms of digital communication that included LINE messaging and a real-time shared Google Doc. We multi-tasked and used different communication tools during the interview to stay on track. In this way, we could do real-time reflections on the interviews as they unfolded—more easily prioritising some topics and resituating or skipping others. These were tools that as digital natives we knew well and arguably better than older experienced scholars. Being student researchers amid COVID, while extremely challenging, encouraged us to exercise our creativity and to bring together different tools we were proficient in to make our interview experience smoother.

## Amplifying refugee voices

While we wanted to make sure that the language of Yasser's story in the Refugee Voices Japan website was understandable to any audience, we needed to keep in mind that we were neither piecing together fragments of his narrative to make our own story nor were we inserting our own interpretation of his experiences. Our goal was to portray Yasser in the way he wished for his story to be portrayed. Parajuli and Horey (2021) affirm this approach, stating that research “involving vulnerable populations can only be judged successful when it helps to make the voice of vulnerable people heard”.

Nevertheless, we also carry the responsibility to be conduits of Yasser's honest narrative, including the duty to protect his safety. As noted by Clark-Kazak (2017, 13), researchers must “avoid collecting potentially incriminating data” as there may be “serious consequences for their safety, well-being, migration status and/or eligibility for services”. We experienced this conundrum when Yasser shared a story of his work<sup>12</sup> experience that we thought

<sup>12</sup> <https://refugeevoicesjapanet.wordpress.com/narrators/yasser/first-role-for-many-actors/>

painted a clear picture of the inhumane conditions asylum seekers are subjected to in Japan. But upon consultation with our *senpai* researcher, David Slater, and of course Yasser himself, we decided to exclude it in order to avoid any undue risk or conflict. Despite the stability of having refugee status, any potentially incriminating data disclosed could threaten the public perception of other asylum seekers in the country; they could be seen as law offenders.

## Future goals

The opportunity to participate in this oral narrative ethnographic research on refugees greatly enriched my studies and helped me clarify my goals for the future. As I go through the final year of my undergraduate degree, I am guided by my experiences in this project that encourage me to re-examine my perception of the research assignments I am tasked to fulfil—to rethink my approach to gathering data and ensure that I come into research projects with a purpose; not merely to produce written work but to contribute to uplifting marginalised populations. I endeavour to partake in ethnographies that not only help understand humans but also address social injustices (Spradley 1979, 16). While it is undoubtedly difficult to do in my position, as student research output is commonly perceived as “derivative and secondary” and contributing “little to nothing that advances the discipline” (Badke 2012, 9). Participating in this research has empowered me that even though I am merely a student, I too can be a “resource” and “producer of knowledge” (Fielding / Bragg 2003, 4).

Furthermore, being part of the refugee-research project along with leading the refugee-support student group has allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of what I wish to pursue in the future, proving that involving students as researchers helps them in their professional trajectory (Madan / Teitge 2013). Fuelled by my experiences in this project, I secured an internship at an international organisation dedicated to refugees. With the protracted and emerging humanitarian crises all over the world today, conducting support backed by well-founded research is paramount now more than ever. As I complete my undergraduate degree, I have decided to pursue higher education and gain an advanced understanding of human rights, law, and issues of forced migration in hopes that I someday contribute to the creation of theoretical knowledge to better understand the plight of refugees and to improve the implementation of practical refugee support.

## References

- Badke, William B. 2012. *Teaching Research Processes: The Faculty Role in the Development of Skilled Student Researchers*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing.
- BBC. 2012. "Syria in Civil War, Red Cross Says." July 15, 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18849362>.
- Clark-Kazak, Christina. 2017. "Ethical Considerations: Research with People in Situations of Forced Migration." *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 33, no. 2 (August): 11–7. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1043059ar>.
- Fielding, Michael / Bragg, Sara. 2003. *Students as Researchers Making a Difference*. Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.
- Ganguly, Sonali. 2018. "Understanding Nonverbal Cues: A Key to Success in Interviews." *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills* 11, no. 2: 62–72. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3215130>.
- Grant, Aimee / Mannay, Dawn / Morgan, Melanie. 2017. "Reducing Researcher Dominance in Qualitative Interviewing: The Intersection of the Novel and the Mundane." [Conference Paper]. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313250465\\_Reducing\\_researcher\\_dominance\\_in\\_qualitative\\_interviewing\\_the\\_intersection\\_of\\_the\\_novel\\_and\\_the\\_mundane](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313250465_Reducing_researcher_dominance_in_qualitative_interviewing_the_intersection_of_the_novel_and_the_mundane).
- Karnieli-Miller, Orit / Strier, Roni / Pessach, Liat. 2009. "Power Relations in Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 19: 279–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308329306>.
- Loue, Sana / Loff, Bebe. 2019. "Teaching Vulnerability in Research: A Study of Approaches Utilized by a Sample of Research Ethics Training Programs." *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 14, no. 4: 395–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264619869130>.
- Madan, Christopher R. / Teitge, Braden D. 2013. "The Benefits of Undergraduate Research: The Student's Perspective." *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal* 15: 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.26209/MJ1561274>.
- Mendola, Daria / Parroco, Anna Maria / Li Donni, Paolo. 2020. "Accounting for Interdependent Risks in Vulnerability Assessment of Refugees." In *Book of Short Papers SIS 2020*, edited by A. Pollice / N. Salvati / F. Schirippa Spagnolo, 1418–23. London: Pearson.
- Parajuli, Jamuna / Horey, Dell. 2021. "Reflections on Researching Vulnerable Populations: Lessons from a Study with Bhutanese Refugee Women." *Nursing Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (April): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nin.12443>.
- Reuters. 2016. "Asylum Seekers in Japan Reach Record 7,586 in 2015; 27 Accepted." January 23, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-immigrants-idUSKCN0V10E7>.
- Sah, Lalita Kumari / Singh, Devendra Raj / Sah, Rajeeb Kumar. 2020. "Conducting Qualitative Interviews Using Virtual Communication Tools amid COVID-19 Pandemic: A Learning Opportunity for Future Research." *JNMA: Journal of the Nepal Medical Association* 58, no. 232: 1103–6. <https://doi.org/10.31729/jnma.5738>.
- Spradley, James P. 1979. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Tamura, Mariko. 2020. "Asylum Seekers in Japan Face Battle for Survival in Time of Coronavirus." *The Japan Times*, June 27, 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2020/06/27/issues/asylum-seekers-coronavirus/>.
- Van Hear, Nicholas. 2014. "Refugees, Diasporas, and Transnationalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, edited by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Gil Loescher, Katy Long, and Nando Sigona, 176–87. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199652433.013.0016>.



## **PART 2**

**Experiencing rural Japan through remote fieldwork:  
Involving undergraduate and graduate students  
in research at the University of Vienna**



HANNO JENTZSCH

SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN

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

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

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

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



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

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

## Preparing the Winter Field School

### How to approach “Aso”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **From on-site to online**

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

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

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

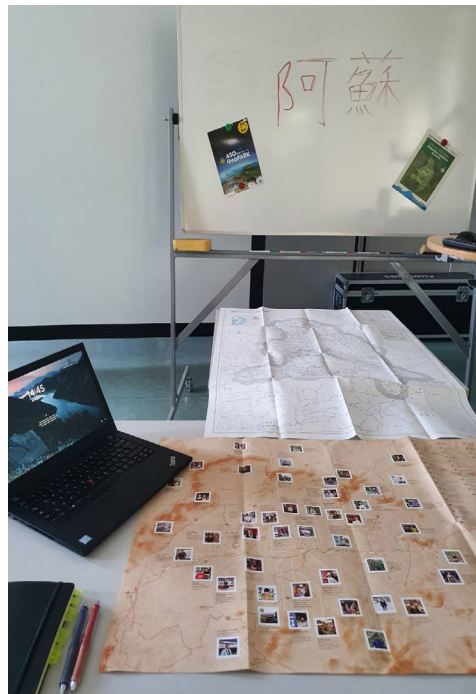
We soon realised that the four groups would have to rely on different strategies to gather useful data. The teams working on tourism and migration quickly found numerous promotion videos, blogs and social media posts, e.g., materials suitable for an actual digital ethnography. The other groups were unable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

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

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

### Virtually on site: The Aso Winter Field School

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



Pic. 1: Switching to an online format



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

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

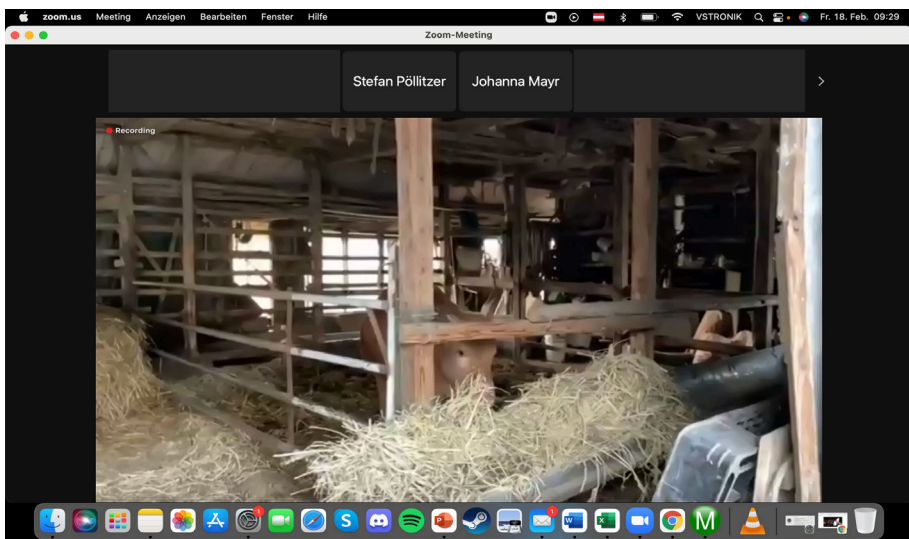


Pic. 2: “Virtual walk” through the Aso region

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

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

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



Pic. 3: Encounter with the locals

## The role of students as researchers

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



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

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

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

of course, to enjoy break times between the fieldwork sessions. To achieve at least a limited form of international exchange, we set up two joint events with the Global Leader Program at our partner Kumamoto University: an informal “global café”, where we met with Japanese students on the virtual platform [www.wonder.me](http://www.wonder.me) and a more formal closing workshop with a Japanese audience, where each group presented their findings. According to our participants, the social aspects of our project were a major factor in making the Winter Field School such a success. Each of them has reflected on their experiences in a blog<sup>1</sup> written in German.

## Data analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## References

- Abe, Miwa 安部美和 / Murakami, Takeshi 村上長嗣. 2020. “Nōson shūraku ni okeru kurashi no henka to Kumamoto jishin: Minamiaso-mura Kawagoda-ku, Kase-ku no jirei kara” 農村集落におけるくらしの変化と熊本地震: 南阿蘇村川後田区・加勢区の事例から [Changes in the life in rural settlements and the Kumamoto Earthquakes: Examples from Kawagoda-ku and Kase-ku in Minamiaso-mura]. *Kumamoto University Policy Research* 10: 29–39.
- Braun, Virginia / Clarke, Victoria. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: Sage.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage.
- Heinze, Kathryn L. / Soderstrom, Sara / Heinze, Justin E. 2016. “Translating Institutional Change to Local Communities: The Role of Linking Organizations.” *Organization Studies* 37, no. 8: 1141–69.

- Jäger, Siegfried. 2015. *Kritische Diskursanalyse: Eine Einführung*. Münster: Unrast.
- Kashiwagi, Kyōsuke 柏木亨介. 2010. "Aso to iu jikūkan no settei: shinwa kara kyōdoshi e" 阿蘇という時空間の設定: 神話から郷土誌へ [Configuration of the timespace "Aso": From legends to local history]. In *Kyōdoshi to kindai nihon* 郷土誌と近代日本 [Local history and Japan], edited by Hiroya Yoshitani / Tsutomu Tokieda, 60–81. Tōkyō: Kadogawa Gakugei Shuppan 角川学芸出版.
- Kelly, William W. 2021. "Locality in Shōnai: Scale, Containers, Fields, and Horizons." In *Rethinking Locality in Japan*, edited by Sonja Ganseforth / Hanno Jentzsch, 21–36. New York: Routledge.
- Kreiner, Josef. 2000. *Aso ni mita nihon: Yōroppa no nihon kenkyū to Vin daigaku Aso chōsa* 阿蘇に見た日本: ヨーロッパの日本研究とウィーン大学阿蘇調査 [The Japan I have seen in Aso: Japanese Studies in Europe and the Aso research of the University of Vienna]. Ichinomiya-machi: Ichinomiya-machishi Hensan Iinkai 一宮町史編纂委員会.
- Kumamoto-ken Shōkō Kankō Rōdō-bu Kankō Keizai Kōryūkyoku Kankō Bussan-ka 熊本県商工観光労働部観光経済交流局観光物産課. 2019. "Heisei 30-nen Kumamoto-ken kankō tōkeihyō" 平成30年熊本県観光統計表 [Tourism statistics for Kumamoto Prefecture]. Accessed August 2, 2022. <https://www.pref.kumamoto.jp/soshiki/69/5411.html>.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram. 2020. "Same, Same but Different: Ethnografie und Teilnehmende Beobachtung." In *Wiener Selektion japanologischer Methoden: Jahrgang 2020*, edited by Christina Gmeinbauer / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann / Florian Purkarthofer, 91–120. Vienna: Institut für Japanologie, Universität Wien.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Holthus, Barbara. 2021. "The Meaning of Place for Selfhood and Well-being in Rural Japan." In *Rethinking Locality in Japan*, edited by Sonja Ganseforth / Hanno Jentzsch, 69–84. New York: Routledge.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Lützel, Ralph. 2016. "Was wir schon immer über Aso wissen wollten und uns endlich zu fragen getraut haben." In *Aso: Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft eines Wiener Forschungsprojekts zum ländlichen Japan*, edited by Ralph Lützel / Wolfram Manzenreiter, 7–19. Vienna: Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften/ Japanologie.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Miserka, Antonia. 2018. "Aus Studierenden werden Forschende: Ausbildung in der Summer Field School in Aso." *Asien: The German Journal on Contemporary Asia* 149: 82–98.
- Matanle, Peter / Rausch, Anthony / The Shrinking Regions Research Group. 2011. *Japan's Shrinking Regions in the 21st Century: Contemporary Responses to Depopulation and Socioeconomic Decline*. Amherst: Cambria.
- Mayring, Philipp. 2017. "Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse." In *Qualitative Forschung: Ein Handbuch*, edited by Uwe Flick / Ernst von Kardorff / Ines Steinke, 468–475. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Odagiri, Tokumi 小田切徳美. 2016. *Nōsanson wa shōmetsu shinai* 農山村は消滅しない [Rural villages will not perish]. Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten 岩波書店.
- Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian. 2022. "Über die Reziprozität des Freuens bei politischem Handeln—Eine qualitative Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs von subjektivem Wohlbefinden und politischer Partizipation in der Aso-Region in Japan." PhD diss., University of Vienna.
- Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian / Manzenreiter, Wolfram. 2018. "Feldforschung in Aso: Wolfram Manzenreiter im Gespräch mit Sebastian Polak-Rottmann." *Minikomi: Austrian Journal of Japanese Studies* 87: 56–61.
- Przybylski, Liz. 2021. *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Slawik, Alexander / Kreiner, Josef / Linhart, Sepp / Pauer, Erich. 1975. "Einleitung: 1. Problemstellung, Planung und Durchführung des Projekts." In *Aso: Vergangenheit und Gegenwart eines ländlichen Raumes in Südapan I*, edited by Alexander Slawik / Josef Kreiner / Sepp Linhart / Erich Pauer, 11–35. Vienna: Institut für Japanologie, Universität Wien.
- Takahashi, Yoshitaka 高橋佳孝. 2012. "Tayō no shutai ga kakawaru Aso sōgen saisei no torikumi" 多様な主体がかかわる阿蘇草原再生の取り組み [New movement in collaborative activities for conservation and restoration of Aso grassland]. In *Aso to sōgen: kankyō, shakai, bunka* 阿蘇と草原: 環境、社会、文化 [Aso and grassland], edited by Kyūshū Minzoku Gakkai, 5–27. Miyazaki: Kōmyakusha 鉦脈社.
- Ugoretz, Kaitlyn. 2021. "Demystifying Remote Research in Anthropology and Area Studies." *Asia Pacific Perspectives* 17, no. 1: 52–71.

Wilhelm, Johannes. 2020. "Das Grasland von Aso zwischen gesellschaftlicher Schrumpfung und Landschaftserhalt." In *Japan 2021: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, edited by David Chiavacci / Iris Wiczorek, 222–249. Munich: Iudicium.



WOLFRAM MANZENREITER

## Training for fieldwork in Japan at home: Reflections on the 2022 D Summer Field School

### Introduction

Fieldwork and ethnography are important contributions to the methodological toolbox of social sciences used for generating data in close proximity to and during lasting engagement with the social issues in the focus of research. Fieldwork and ethnography also support the description of other people's lives in detail, making them understandable on the basis of first-hand experience. Ethnographic fieldwork is best suited to gaining a deeper understanding of living conditions from the perspectives of those being researched (Corte / Irwin 2017). Data collection is done in the field, drawing on a variety of observation techniques and data collection methods that must be selected—as well as learned and tested—beforehand to fit the research question and conditions of the research site. Particularly when researching the social lives of people in different cultural settings and about their views on life, fieldwork is better qualified than textbook studies and quantitative survey techniques (Bernard 2006). The best way to make the complex demands and opportunities of ethnographic field research clear to students and next-generation scholars is in the field.

But what to do when the field site suddenly becomes inaccessible, as was the case after Japan's borders remained closed to research visits for more than two years during the COVID-19 pandemic? Can the same learning outcomes be achieved when the research site is transferred from Japan to a location in Austria that merely resembles Japan? In this essay, I will explore the potentials and pitfalls of researching Japan at home by reflecting on the insights gained from running the 2021 D Summer Field School in Austria's mountainous Pinzgau region as a substitute for the 2020 Aso Summer Field School originally planned to take place in the Aso basin in northern Kumamoto where our research activities on rural well-being are concentrated. I will first briefly expand on the general didactic and educational benefits of the field school as a distinctive way of learning before moving on to outline the winding and



bumpy road to the D Summer Field School. The final section will reflect on the feasibility and applicability of field school training in Austria as a contribution to the education of next-generation scholars of Japan, through the voices of participants. These voices were collected in two focus group interviews with all participating students two days after their return from the field. The gender balance among the nine students was nearly even, all but one were in their early 20s, and except for one graduate student, all interviewees were in the second or third year of their undergraduate studies. Together with a postgrad student who had supported me during the field school, we asked the participants about their impressions and experiences. We wanted to know what their goals for the Summer Field School were, whether they felt they had achieved these goals, where they saw problems in implementation, and what lessons they had taken with them from the experience. The focus group interviews took place online via Zoom and lasted for about 80–90 minutes each; recordings were transcribed with the help of a teaching assistant and analysed using the software package MaxQDA.

### **The potential merits of field school classes**

When teaching qualitative research methods in lectures and textbooks, the focus is on unique research techniques and theoretical conceptualisation. However, the actual practice of these techniques occurs in the active process of individual research in the field, where researchers are often confronted with unexpected turns and twists (Mannay / Morgan 2015). Researchers know that ethnographic research is neither static nor fixed, but students do not. Relocating the learning environment into unfamiliar and relatively challenging fields helps students realise that ethnographic research is personal, transformational, contingent, and must respond to often-shifting conditions (McGranahan 2014). By doing guided fieldwork together with their professors, students learn to use uncertainty and serendipity to their advantage during research (Hendry 2003), to cope with dead-ends and frustration (Hirsch 2008), and to appreciate the ‘ethnographic moment’ as the effect of engaging the field site and the site back home, where learning, planning, and writing take place, together (Strathern 1999).

Field schools place students and the learning process directly in the research field and have been justifiably praised for their didactic value. Students are likely to learn better when they are involved in hands-on research projects, including “collecting, verifying, and analysing data, and preparing a research report” (Schmid 1992). Autonomy in planning the chosen research tasks and self-responsibility for proper implementation enhance student mo-

tivation and enable the development of transferable cooperation, teamwork, reflexivity, and leadership skills. Peer assessment is particularly useful for improving motivation levels, autonomous learning skills and a sense of connectedness with other students (El-Mowafy 2014). In order to review the work of their peers, students need to reflect on key learning objectives and proper fieldwork methodology. In the preparatory stages, students become more intimate with the field and their new role as researchers by obtaining background information, designing the research plan, and establishing contacts and points of entry. In the midst of this hands-on engagement with places, actors, and events, students reposition themselves as actively self-responsible research subjects when they, for example, have to reschedule field days, develop coping strategies for unexpected obstacles, or follow new leads. As students gain a greater understanding of their research field through engagement, direct experience, and peer assessment, their identity shifts from that of a student to that of a researcher (Keeling 2008). Students not only obtain a better understanding of the features of their surroundings and of the relevant theories for making sense of their observations, but also a greater awareness of their own role in the learning process and their personal engagement on-site (Marvell et al. 2013). Without the authoritative voice of a course instructor or textbook explaining the rules of action and sequential logic of processes, they have to come to terms with the messiness of the moment, the confusion of multi-perspectivity, and the ever-present possibility of emergence even when it seems like nothing is happening. Confronted with the unpredictable immediacy of the field, students learn to cope with phases of boredom and heightened attention, recording, and categorising their observations in order to identify patterns and interpret possible meanings. The affective as well as cognitive resonance spectrum naturally leads students to grapple with issues such as subjectivity, presuppositions, one's own role, and positionality. Like all fieldwork, a field school is an intense experience that often pushes students and researchers to their limits, both physically and mentally –thereby providing opportunities to learn more about oneself and grow from the challenges.

Field schools have been criticised for being “frequently prohibitively expensive and inaccessible to many [...] restricted to graduate students, effectively ignoring the majority” (Copeland / Dengah 2016). In my eyes, the greater challenge is figuring out how to fit a field school, including the preparatory and post-visit data analysis courses, into the tight corset of the Bologna curricular structure. Taken all together, a two-week summer field school actually requires a commitment of a year and more, if one includes the ap-

plication period for external funding. However, if properly prepared, ethnographic fieldwork training is nevertheless possible on an extremely tight financial budget when, for example, (a) students are invited to collaborate on pre-existing research projects (Schmid 1992), (b) teaching, preparing for, and participating in the field research project is included as part of the curriculum, (c) students are empowered to use time-saving approaches and participatory rapid assessment techniques such as non-participant observation, object collection, and semi-structured interviews, and d) prior frequent visits by faculty members have generated stable relationships in the field and the foundations for mutual trust and unobtrusiveness are therefore laid, allowing students to quickly access the field and their research subjects.

### **Outline and design of the 2020 and 2021 field schools**

In 2019, I successfully applied for funding from the Toshiba International Foundation and the Japan Foundation to hold a follow-up course to the 2018 Aso Summer Field School (Manzenreiter / Miserka 2018). While the 2018 ASFS was designed to provide survey data and ethnographic data on the interplay of social connectedness and rural well-being in Aso, the 2020 programme was designed as an expression of gratitude for the support and trust we found in the region since beginning our research in Aso in 2015. The output of the 2020 summer field school was expected to contribute future regional diversity and local sustainability by supporting inbound tourism and the international outreach activities of local stakeholders.

Tourism is a key industry with which outlying regions can counter the impacts of population shrinkage and economic restructuring. The beauty of natural scenery, regional history, local customs, and traditional ways of life have special appeal for visitors who want to get a glimpse of Japan that goes beyond the metropolitan centres of the past and the present. However, local stakeholders too often fail to understand the objectives of travellers from abroad, or they do not know how to communicate with foreign markets. Administrative boundaries restrict collaboration with stakeholders from neighbouring areas, thereby jeopardizing the great potential to be found in pooling the local resources of slightly wider areas to attract special interest tourism. The 2020 Aso Summer Field School was designed as action research to develop recommendations for short- and midterm visits to the Aso area to attract foreign visitors wanting to explore Japan beyond the beaten track. Student participants actively engaged with materials on and from the region with the aim of using local resources (nature, history, culture, and people) to design

self-guided theme trips ranging from a half-day to multiple days in length. It was hoped that, in the long run, domestic visitors might emulate the travel behaviours of international tourists, thereby generating new sources of regional income and local sustainability.

Despite the insecure outcome of the funding situation pending decisions in late April 2020, a group of 13 students applied to participate in the Summer Field School and enrolled in the four-month preparatory course. The nagging sense of uncertainty due to funding was only aggravated by the Japanese government's restrictive COVID-19 travel rules, announced a few days into the summer semester. Only the hope of the restoration of normal travel conditions before the summer travel season kept participants motivated to prepare their work packages for the field visit. Students were unable to meet in person for most of the semester but got used to meeting and supporting each other via various online channels. During the course, students learned about (a) the region of interest; (b) natural and cultural resources on the ground; (c) organisations in charge of managing tourism; (d) hands-on ethnographic research methods, including interviews, unobtrusive participation, taking field notes; (e) designing special interest travel recommendations, and (f) advertising travel plans to unknown audiences via the internet. By the end of the term, student working groups had designed four thematic travel itineraries to encourage tourists from abroad to visit the target region for extended periods of time. Each travel itinerary gave travellers the opportunity to delve more deeply into local history, culture, and customs and to learn more about Japan's history in general, the influences of geography and topography on community life, and the connections between folk traditions, myth, and agriculture. For this purpose, the working groups drew on a variety of sources that were sparse and, if available at all, usually only in Japanese. Students studied online and print materials issued by tourism authorities on the target places and topics, studied folklore and regional history texts, and compiled the logistical data needed for a self-organised exploration of the region's cultural, culinary, or geological treasures. It was planned to discuss the itineraries with local tour operators and municipalities, have them tested by participants during the field visit, and finally to develop them as English website content for local tourism promoters. Additionally, the material would be compiled with photos, films, and stories gathered from interviews with inhabitants and researchers of the region.

When it became clear that the borders would remain closed throughout the summer, the field school was rescheduled to the fall. When this trip could

again not be realised, consultation with the sponsors resulted in the transfer of the summer field school to the following year. However, a year later, none of the originally enrolled students were still available. Four weeks into the summer term, in our third semester of distance learning, I suggested a radical change to the new group: holding a summer field school in rural Austria in order to avoid the frustration of the previous year and to gather comparative data. The students' initial response was sceptical, which I personally understood very well.

The only precedent, by early Viennese Japanologist Alexander Slawik, who sent his students to do fieldwork in the Burgenland region and other sites of eastern Austria (Kreiner 2000), seemed to me to be a slightly crazy and ultimately quite strenuous exercise that was based partly in his own roots in ethnology and folklore studies, and to the lack of a curriculum prior to the early 1970s that would have required a thorough legitimisation of such unusual coursework. It should be noted that Slawik's own writings reveal the epistemological foundation of such academic exercises (Slawik 1961). However, the reason I changed my mind on this was due not only to learning more about his theoretical reflections or the insurmountable problem of travelling to Japan during the pandemic. Rather, I came to agree with the earlier scholar's concept that the cultural discrepancy between the academic life of a student in Vienna and the Austrian countryside is considerable enough to experience a sense of foreignness and reflect on positionality while systematically rehearsing methods collecting observational and interview data in unfamiliar terrain. Thinking about some of the junior undergraduate students who participated in the 2018 Aso Summer Field School but lacked the language skills to contribute to the generation of data through conversations and interviews, I realised that the problem of activating student skills could be mitigated by reducing the cultural distance between the urban us and the rural other. The game changer was ultimately the creditability of participation in the field school as an internship, as required by the curriculum. Students usually conduct their internship in Japan or doing Japan-related activities, but were largely denied access to this during the pandemic. Grants by the faculty and by myself, the author, mitigated the financial burden to students' budgets.

I chose the small village community of D-village in Pinzgau/Salzburg as the target region. Since I had repeatedly taken colleagues and students from the department, as well as visitors from Japan, to the village for retreats and excursions, we had ample insight into the locality and reliable access to gatekeepers and interlocutors. The university owns a simple sports and seminar

centre in the village, thus solving any logistical problems by providing affordable lodging and meals and sufficient space for group meetings, preparatory work, and retreat.

The municipality covers an area of 49.7 square kilometres at the foot of the 3,000-metre-high Hochkönig massif. About half (49.8%) of the municipality's area is covered by forest and a quarter (25.2%) is alpine terrain (as of 2020, Statistik Austria). 18.4% is used as permanent settlement area, 14.9% for agricultural purposes. The region is one of the most sparsely populated in Austria. In 2021, 721 persons lived in D-village, coming to 15 persons per square kilometre (or 85 in the permanent settlement area). The majority of the population lives in the village centre or in smaller settlements along the main transport routes. There are 310 buildings registered in the cadastre, including 6 hotels and numerous smaller lodging establishments. Tourism is a significant economic factor in the municipality, which provides capacity for 1,600 overnight stays during peak season. About half of all jobs in the municipality are in the tourism sector. A good two-thirds of the 365 local employees must commute to work and cars are indispensable not only for this: only four buses pass through the village during the day, and getting to the nearest train station (13 km) requires a taxi or private car. It takes a little over an hour to travel by car to the provincial capital of Salzburg, 70 kilometres away; it is 18 minutes to Saalfelden (18 kilometres), 25 minutes to Bischofshofen (22 kilometres), and 35 minutes to Zell am See (31 kilometres). There are no schools in the village and the local doctor opens the clinic only sporadically; the only small supermarket is open half days. Most of the people in D finished their educational career at the level of compulsory education (29.5%) or with an apprenticeship (40.6%). 25% attended secondary school and 3.3% earned a university degree (Statistik Austria 2022).

The landscape of Austria, like Japan, consists of up to 70% steep mountainous areas. This shared feature, however, has completely different impacts on the social and economic structures of the two countries, mainly due to Austria's significance in domestic and international winter sports and alpine tourism. Whereas in Japan, regional decline and population shrinkage is widespread throughout the country and in some cases has even reached metropolises and regional urban centres, in Austria many rural regions benefit disproportionately from tourism. Rural outmigration, population aging, inadequate infrastructure, and structural economic insufficiencies are not unknown in Austria, but, particularly in the alpine regions of western Austria, many localities have succeeded in reversing the socioeconomic urban-rural

divide to their advantage. Of course, not every community nor the entire population of a place benefit equally from tourism, and the prosperity of some generates social and environmental consequential costs that are imposed on all of society. We heard critical voices about this from the population during interviews and private conversations, in the pub late at night, and in written comments on our survey.

As D village suffers from over-tourism, the focus had to shift from action research and tourism promotion to questions of subjective well-being in rural peripheries (Manzenreiter 2016, 2018). By replicating the research program conducted in Aso in 2018, we wanted to find out whether rural areas contribute to the well-being of the population through specific forms of social organisation and interpersonal interaction. By comparing observational and survey data, we also hoped to see whether country-specific differences between Japan and Austria became more visible when using the same survey instrument. During the 10-week run-up to the field school, students independently worked on one out of five work packages. Four to five persons per group were responsible for (a) reviewing literature on happiness and well-being in Austria, (b) recording the socio-economic, historical, and topographical characteristics of the study area, (c) method development, (d) planning and logistics, and (e) finances and PR. Information on work progress and materials was shared through a digital learning platform and discussed in weekly online plenary sessions. Students met in person for the first time in the field. A short note composed by the PR team announced our stay in the community newsletter, and photos and news about Japan and happiness research shared on Instagram and Facebook aimed to reinforce interest in the topic.

By the time the Summer Field School began in July, the questionnaire, a translated and adapted version of the survey used in Aso in 2018, had been written, tested, and accordingly finalised. The schedule, still rudimentary at the time of field entry, ultimately featured a dense work schedule in the two weeks from July 17–30, including the personal distribution of questionnaires to all households, site visits to the municipal administration and public infrastructure facilities, a hike led by the local branch of the mountaineering club, guided tours of the biomass heating plant and wastewater treatment plant, and meetings with representatives of the local brass band, volunteer fire department, hunters association, and two cultural heritage preservation groups (Trachtenfrauen and Hochkönigpass). Due to COVID-19, some appointments were cancelled at short notice (flag consecration), postponed (open-air concerts, the Hundstein Ranggeln wrestling competition), or added at short no-



tice (meeting with the mayor, distillery visit). Furthermore, the students also staffed a meeting booth in the marketplace, where locals and visitors could learn to fold origami or write in Japanese, and enjoy cold *mugicha* (roasted barley tea) and *taiyaki* (a fish-shaped waffle with red bean filling) made in the hotel kitchen. Daily time slots were set aside for morning briefings, instructions, and work assignments; in the evenings, there were opportunities to share experiences, reflect, and write field protocols. Care was taken to provide for enough downtime to distance oneself from fieldwork and/or the group.

Although the survey was distributed to the doorstep of all households, including Japanese snacks and tea bags as a small sign of appreciation, the response rate was only 30%. A total of 138 questionnaires could be used for analysis. Results were presented at various occasions throughout the following year, including the annual meeting of the Japan Association of Regional Policy and the conference of the German Association of Japanese Studies.

## Student voices: Goals accomplished

When asked about the goals of the field research session, the students tended to answer in generalisations, differentiating between the didactic and practical research orientation:

The goal can be seen, firstly, in the introduction to field research and the techniques of working in field research, and secondly, in the collection of data for comparison with Aso research. (2.2)

I would say there were two major goals. One was to learn about field research methodology, what you can do, interviews, surveys, how to approach people, how to start conversations, how to conduct them, how to lead them, what difficulties there can be. The second was, of course, the research goal, more or less related to the interplay between social contacts and structures in a village community, and how these can then affect feelings of happiness and cohesion. (1.3)

Interviewees agreed that these goals were more or less achieved:

Yes, I think that we obtained a very good insight into field research, what it could look like. I mean, we had never done this before. (1.5)



I also got a lot out of it and I'm glad that I signed up. [...] In retrospect, I really think that the field study itself was very well done. (1.1)

The methodological goal of the Summer Field School was addressed indirectly when participants were asked what they had learned that would benefit their future development:

I have always shied away from conducting qualitative interviews, I just didn't know much about it, but something I will definitely take with me is that a good interview needs preparation. [...] I found the instructions to be very good and structured and I think that I would very much like to take this with me. (2.4)

In general, these methods, let's just say, the interview or the structure of the questionnaire, these could be techniques that could later play a role in Japanese studies with regards to, how should I say, seminar papers, bachelor theses, or further research projects. (2.2)

I didn't expect that fieldwork would necessarily interest me, [...] but now after the actual field visit, I can imagine more and more that this will become something that I would possibly do in some form, not necessarily professionally, but in some way in the future. (2.1)

Gains in transferable skills were also seen in terms of basic social and communication skills:

Yes, so approaching people, I think we have already learned a bit about that. (1.5)

So, just to listen more carefully in a conversation and to look at the questions again is, I think, certainly a competence that is important. (1.1)

Personally, I have also learned a bit about how to approach situations, how to formulate questions in certain situations, how to perhaps steer or move the conversation forward [...] and the other thing was how to approach people, because personally, I am not really the kind of person who would approach someone on my own and be very open, and I have found it helpful to move a bit outside my bubble and I think it is always helpful to try something new. (1.2)

On a personal level, the participants were very happy with the progression of the field weeks and had many positive surprises, as they stated during reflection. Most of the praise was directed at the group itself.

What really worked well was the overall group dynamic and the group itself. I think there was really a very good dynamic, good teamwork from all sides. (2.2)

I think that in two weeks you can already see how far you can actually take each other, for example, when we all handed out the questionnaires and met in the evening and talked about it, that you can take something from every other team afterwards and also make use of it yourself. And everyone took part in the brainstorming, so I think that was worth a lot. (1.1)

I didn't expect the group dynamics to be so good, I have to admit. I'm a bit pessimistic, because I'm used to the fact that groups tend to diverge a bit, and you somehow don't know what the others are doing, or information isn't passed on, and that everything is somehow a bit uncoordinated. (2.4)

The prominent emphasis students placed on team building and group dynamics is probably due to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. All the interviewees had spent most of their time during the previous semester separate from each other at their homes. The summer field school was the first time in nearly two years that they could be together with their peers. The assessment of collaboration and mutual assistance may have also been caused by various communication and coordination problems that occurred during the term. Only two of the five working groups had few problems when self-organizing their task packages; the other three were partly unaware of their weekly or overall goals, were difficult to reach or failed to motivate team members, and did not know how to effectively use the online platform's forums and file storage or communicate through their own social media channels.

This may also explain why they rated the contribution of their own preparatory work for achieving these goals and accomplishments as being rather insignificant. The fact that the establishment of rapport with gatekeepers and interlocutors, arrangement of guided tours, preparation and testing of survey questions, and collection of interview topics were also the result of the preparation phase passed by comparatively unnoticed. However, the importance of contacts, trust, and supporters was mentioned in the interviews.

In such a small place, even getting in without knowing anybody is probably very difficult. (1.1)

I think we were very lucky to know G., because when his name came up in conversation, people were immediately like, “Ah yeah ok, I see you’re staying there in the village,” and that helped tremendously. (1.3)

[...] and what was also unexpected was that the mayor took so much time for us and did so many things for us. The fact that we almost had the key to the village, more or less, was also a bit unexpected. But it was also somehow a good feeling to know that we were taken care of from above, and were actually so welcome. (2.2)

Negative experiences in the field were most likely to be reported in the area of mental and physical stress, due to glaring summer heat, overexertion, and the challenging demands on concentration and memory skills during interviews.

What I didn’t expect was that my feet would get so cold and that the sun would be so extreme, because at home I live in a very similar region (2.1).

I also expected that sharing a room with someone would not be easy, and this expectation was exceeded in the negative sense. (1.4)

I found it quite difficult to follow the conversation, also to take notes, [...] for example, the interview with the hunter, he threw out lots of information very quickly in the beginning, and I couldn’t keep up with the writing. (1.1)

What I didn’t like were the extremely long interviews, which sometimes lasted for two to two-and-a-half hours, especially if they were at 8 o’clock at night, it was very exhausting to somehow keep the ball rolling, because one’s concentration was gone after a while. (1.4)

Field research, as the participants experienced, is stressful because of long working days and the feeling of not being able to divest oneself from the role of the observer.

I had a picture in my mind of us only working during certain periods of time, and after a few days it really became clear to me that it was just almost 24 hours a day and you are

also constantly busy observing. It was there for many of us in the background, but we didn't fully realise it until later. (1.2)

Because even if someone tells you, you're going to have to observe for two weeks straight and you're going to feel a lot of stress because you're always kind of on duty, I don't know if you can understand that when it's just pointed out to you. (1.3)

To be fully prepared for such a situation is impossible as

...when you're out in the real field, the whole day is stressful and that's with you all the time, that's the added factor that you can't simulate. (1.4)

Another factor they mentioned was the feeling of rejection and strangeness they faced as visitors.

So that people were quite dismissive, especially in the beginning when we were over there, I mean, I knew that they might not be so open to people from the University of Vienna, but I would not have thought that they would be so dismissive. (1.5)

I also have to say that I expected very little cooperation. When I look at it from home, I have the feeling that our stay was accepted from a distance, and then the unexpected thing was that, over time, it became apparent that we had settled into the community a bit. (1.3)

If more time had been available, more would have been possible, according to the unanimous tenor of the interviewees. Often, reflection on what was learned expressed the realisation that research in the field comes with unexpected surprises that require adaptive strategies or creative solutions.

So I learned that field research is something very organic, and by that I mean that it is not really something that you can plan or that has to follow a particular fixed guideline, but something that happens, how shall I say, naturally and unplanned and also spontaneously. (2.2)

You can plan three weeks well, but whether it really works out the same way is questionable, especially with the dynamic aspects of field research, where we are a larger group and so many factors influence the research process. (2.3)

The more time you have, the better it is, and if you could have made it longer than two weeks, it would have been of course very, very good. (2.2)

In the very beginning, I wouldn't have wanted to be there for three weeks, but now of course I would, especially because we already know each other, and if we were to plan another excursion as a group, somewhere else, then I think almost everyone would be in for three weeks. (2.4)

## Rating the experience

From the students' perspective, the field research training was a great success, primarily due to the experiences gained during the actual field visit and when applying field research methods. However, as a professor, I wonder if the long-term effects might rather be expressed in the appreciation and promotion of general soft skills such as teamwork, flexibility, openness, creativity, and spontaneity than in the implementation of methodological knowledge for future projects, such as interview techniques, questionnaires, time planning, network building, etc.

Both positive and negative memories of the field school may have a formative impact on similar research projects, even if these effects require reflection and directions for action that were not formulated in the jargon of ethnological theory, project planning, and organisational management of the interviews. For example, relativity and positionality were never directly addressed in such terms, but that doesn't mean that students didn't become aware of them:

It was interesting to observe how people came up with ways to introduce themselves and behave on their own. That's probably part of fieldwork, too? And that's something that will probably also be different from place to place, because it will certainly be quite different in Japan than in Salzburg or when I do research in Vienna. (1.1)

We realised that each person always has a distinctive point of view. That's why I think it's important to find several contact persons right from the start, so that you can get a coherent picture and not just bring your own subjective impression in later. (1.1)

Yes, you learn to get outside of yourself a bit more, to interact with many different people and to bite the bullet a little and approach people (1.1).

From a methodological didactic perspective, it is interesting to note that in the unanimously positive assessment of the field school experience, there was little mention of gaining academic knowledge, and none at all about the research impact of the lower-than-expected distribution and response rates of our questionnaire survey. Things that were more at hand received more attention, such as rural well-being and the social fabric of community life.

Students said that during the two weeks of residency and through the guided tours and conversations with local people:

... we also gained good insight into what life and the community are like. (1.5)

... and also what we learned in the interviews, we really learned how this village works, which is also applicable to other places and cities, that was very interesting in terms of content. (1.3)

And yes, what else did I personally learn during the excursion [...] just very, very much about life in the country, or what satisfaction in the countryside is made up of, and that not everything is perfect, and yes, in principle what makes country life especially in this remote area so unique. (2.2)

## Conclusion

I do not entirely agree with the interviewees in these points. Without denying that they have learned a lot about the village and its people, they and I are very far from understanding the social rules and connections of this village community, or “the village” in general, and much less about how these may or may not be related to individual and collective happiness. This difference in perception speaks to the assumption that—regardless of any positive outcomes and appreciation—participants did not settle into the intended role as researchers, instead continuing to see their contribution and experiences from the perspective of students.

From my own experience, I still struggle to acknowledge the applicability of a summer field school in Austria for Japanese studies. While still believing the theoretical benefits outlined above, I also see the difficulties in the implementation process in this concrete case and several possible lessons if another attempt is made. I agree with students in their self-assessment that they learned a lot about themselves and the difficulties of research in an unknown field. Advancement in methodological skills, problem solving, teamwork, and critical reflection of one’s own position in the research process

also deserve unanimous acclamation. However, more time would be needed to consolidate these experiences. Students would immensely benefit from joining the processing of research data and thus accompanying the project to its end. However, this would require a minimum of three courses total, spread out over an entire academic year, during which one has to deal intensively with data and questions that are, if at all, only indirectly relevant to the understanding of Japan. Creating a full package suffers from the efficiency corset of the Bologna curricula structure, from the lack of a suitable minor curriculum open to students from other area studies, and from the scarcity of funding opportunities for reorganising the summer field school to last for six to eight weeks. Yet these are practical problems and, as a scholar, I am more concerned with ideas and ideals. No matter what, I look forward to taking students out in the field again, whether in Austria or Japan.

## Acknowledgements

I want to thank first of all the students who participated in the summer field school and shared their reflections with the interviewers. Special thanks to Antonia Miserka for her great support in the field and with guiding students through the focus group interviews, and to Alexander Celenkovic for the swift transcription of the interviews. We greatly appreciate the support received from the municipality, the secretary, the guides and service workers at the facilities we visited, the major and his deputy, our always friendly and supportive host and his team at the sports and seminar hotel who did so much to take care of us for the two weeks of strenuous fieldwork. Without them, there would have been no 2022 Summer Field School, even in Austria.

## References

- Bernard, H. Russel. 2006. *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Lanham: Altamira Press.
- Corte, Uwe / Irwin, Katharine. 2017. „The Form and Flow of Teaching Ethnographic Knowledge: Hands-on Approaches for Learning Epistemology.” *Teaching Sociology* 45, no. 3: 209–19.
- Copeland, Toni / Dengah, H. J. François . 2016. „Involve Me and I Learn: Teaching and Applying Anthropology.” *Annals of Anthropological Practice* 40, no. 2: 120–33.
- El-Mowafy, Ahmed. 2014. “Using Peer Assessment of Fieldwork to Enhance Students’ Practical Training.” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 39, no. 2: 223–41.
- Hendry, Joy. 2003. „From Scrambled Messages to an Impromptu Dip: Serendipity in Finding a Field Location.” In *Doing Fieldwork in Japan*, edited by Theodore C. Bestor / Patricia G. Steinhoff / Victoria Lyon Bestor, 55–70. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Hirsch, Eric. 2008. “Knowing, Not Knowing, Knowing Anew.” In *Knowing How to Know: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Present*, edited by Narmala Halstead / Eric Hirsch / Judith Okely, 21–37. Oxford / New York: Berghahn Books.
- Keeling, Arn. 2008. “We are Scholars: Using Teamwork and Problem-Based Learning in a Canadian Regional Geography Course.” *Mountain Rise* 4, no. 3: 1–13.

- Kreiner, Josef. 2000. *Aso ni mita Nihon: Yōroppa no Nihon kenkyū to Vin Daigaku Aso chōsa* 阿蘇に見た日本: ヨーロッパの日本研究とウィーン大学阿蘇調査 [Japan, as Seen in Aso: Japanese Studies in Europe and the Aso Project by the University of Vienna]. Ichinomiya: Ichinomiya-chō 一の宮町.
- Mannay, Dawn / Morgan, Melanie. 2015. "Doing Ethnography or Applying a Qualitative Technique? Reflections from the 'Waiting Field.'" *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 2: 166–82.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram. 2016. „Das Aso-Projekt der Wiener Japanologie im Kontext ethnologischer Community Studies.“ In *Aso: Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft eines Wiener Forschungsprojekts zum ländlichen Japan*, edited by Ralph Lützel / Wolfram Manzenreiter, 104–24. Vienna: Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften/Japanologie, Universität Wien.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram. 2018. "Rural Happiness in Japan: Contrasting Urban and Rural Well-being in Kumamoto." In *Rural Areas Between Decline and Resurgence: Lessons from Japan and Austria*, edited by Ralph Lützel, 43–64. Vienna: Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften/Japanologie, Universität Wien.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Miserka, Antonia. 2018. "Aus Studierenden werden Forschende: Ausbildung in der Summer Field School in Aso." *Asien* 149: 82–98.
- Marvell, Alan / Simm, David / Schaaf, Rebecca / Harper, Richard. 2013. "Students as Scholars: Evaluating Student-Led Learning and Teaching during Fieldwork." *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 37, no. 4: 547–66.
- McGranahan, Carole. 2014. "What Is Ethnography? Teaching Ethnographic Sensibilities Without Fieldwork." *Teaching Anthropology* 4: 23–36.
- Schmid, Thomas J. 1992. "Classroom-Based Ethnography: A Research Pedagogy." *Teaching Sociology* 20, no. 1: 29–35.
- Slawik, Alexander. 1961. "Theorie und Praxis der Zusammenarbeit zwischen den anthropologischen Wissenschaften von Ostasien aus gesehen." In *Theorie und Praxis der Zusammenarbeit zwischen den anthropologischen Disziplinen: Bericht über das Zweite Österreichische Symposium auf Burg Wartenstein bei Gloggnitz*, 6. - 12. September 1959, edited by Emil Breitingner / Josef Haekel / Richard Pittioni, 241–59. Horn: Ferdinand Berger.
- Statistik Austria. 2022. "Statistiken." Accessed January 25, 2023. <https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/bevoelkerung-und-soziales> or <https://www.statistik.at/statistiken/industrie-bauhandel-und-dienstleistungen>.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1999. *Property, Substance and Effect: Anthropological Essays on Persons and Things*. London: Athlone Press.





KATJA PALASZEWSKI  
STEFAN PÖLLITZER  
HANNAH PILAR EGGER  
TOBIAS SIMEK

## **Loneliness in Aso: Community-building against ageing, depopulation and pandemic influences**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown worldwide that some groups of people are more vulnerable than others in times of crisis. There is no doubt that the restrictions due to the pandemic, such as social distancing and isolation, have a negative impact on people's mental and physical health, causing problems such as depression and social withdrawal (Stickley / Ueda 2022, 1). As a result, research on loneliness and its implications for health and the social sphere has increased significantly, leading to a growing number of policies aimed at combating this problem and its root causes.

Inagaki et al. define loneliness as a “distressing state indicating that one's basic need for social connection is not being met” (2016, 1096). However, loneliness is not only a problem that affects individuals; it can also characterise communities which lack social connections between people. This is particularly relevant in the context of rural Japan, where the ageing of the population and urbanisation have placed strain on the sustainability and health of local communities (Lützel et al. 2020, 1–3). Elderly residents living alone are likely to have a less-developed social network than younger people, and mobility problems may further limit their options for social participation (see WHO 2021). Another important issue in the context of the pandemic is the lack of digital literacy among the elderly, which has resulted in a widening of the digital gap.

Based on the thesis that loneliness is increasing in the Aso region, not only because of the pandemic, but also because of the shrinking and ageing population, we developed our research questions for this project. This study aims to visualise Aso as a field where issues typical of rural Japan intersect with the newer challenges posed by the pandemic. If loneliness is perceived as a problem, we aim to identify what kind of activities, measures and initi-

atives exist to counteract it. We also wish to discover more about the influence of the pandemic on social participation and community activities and how the various actors may be attempting to deal with this additional challenge. During most of our research process we worked with an understanding of loneliness as a lack of social connections and—applying this to communities—a lack of social participation and social cohesion. There is often a failure to acknowledge loneliness in this sense, due to it being perceived as an individual problem and a personal “feeling” that one has to deal with oneself rather than an issue that affects society as a whole. The links between social participation, isolation and loneliness have been thoroughly demonstrated by Ge et al. (2022), who outline the crucial function of social participation in preventing conditions that foster loneliness and other health-related problems:

Social participation among older adults directly increases social interactions which has the potential to reduce cognitive decline, lowers the risk of depression, and creates a sense of belonging which alleviate[s ...] loneliness. (Ge et al. 2022, 7)

Our research focuses on social participation as one of the main instruments for combating loneliness on a socio-political level, rather than investigating matters of health. In this way we aim to highlight not only crucial issues that rural Japanese areas face today, but also positive aspects, such as the ability of regions and communities to combat these problems.

In addition to sources such as geographic, demographic and historical data, we conducted seven semi-structured interviews with stakeholders directly or indirectly involved with the provision of social welfare in the Aso region, specifically in *Aso-shi*, *Takamori-machi* and *Nishihara-mura*. The stakeholders ranged from politicians and representatives of the local social welfare council (*shakai fukushi kyōgikai*) to a former leader of a neighbourhood group (*kumi*). Using the qualitative data analysis system MAXQDA, we developed our codes and themes flexibly, applying the Thematic Analysis approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022).

## Literature review

Our topic can be divided into two partly overlapping fields of research. Firstly, there are the factors which threaten, restrict and obstruct social participation in Aso and therefore potentially foster loneliness. Here we have identified the ageing and shrinking of the population as long-term trends and the COVID-19 pandemic as an acute issue affecting the community’s social cohesion and in-

dividual resident's social participation. Secondly, we investigated the actors actively engaged in fighting the aforementioned problems through preventive activities, policies, and various initiatives against loneliness, which often involve the stimulation of social participation.

Numerous researchers have pointed out the significant long-term risks posed by rural decline for the provision of health care and social welfare in regional communities, as well as related issues, such as the increasing number of elderly people living alone (*hitorigurashi kōreisha*) (Lützeler et al. 2020; Miserka 2020; Haddad 2011). According to data provided by the municipalities of the three regions we examined, their respective ageing rates exceed the national average of 28.9% (Statistical Handbook of Japan 2022). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines ageing rate as the proportion of a society's population comprising those aged 65 and above (2020). Although Nishihara-*mura* has experienced a slight population increase due to its proximity to the metropolitan area of Kumamoto-*shi* and important transport links such as Kumamoto Airport, its ageing rate is still 32.3%. The populations of Takamori-*machi* and Aso-*shi* are both shrinking rapidly with aging rates around 40%—they are officially classified as depopulated areas (*kaso chiiki*) and thus targets of government-sponsored revitalisation programmes (e.g., the Chiiki okoshi kyōrokutai programme; see Devenci et al. in this volume).

Although studies investigating the influence of COVID-19 on social participation and loneliness in rural communities have been increasing (Ōta et al. 2021; Jewett et al. 2021; Rezaeipandari et al. 2020), the issue is still relatively new and its—mostly problematic—long-term effects are only slowly unfolding. Thus, there is a need for further research on this topic, especially focusing on the impact of the pandemic on already existing problems. For instance, Ōta et al. conducted a study on *osekkai*, a term usually translated as “meddling” or “interference”. In the context of their study, it is explained as “helping culture” (2021, 1) and refers to monthly meetings, exchanges and the linking of residents in a particular region. The study is specifically concerned with the reconstruction of social relations in rural Japan and suggests they have been severely affected by the pandemic. The authors conclude that community activities have been able to increase people's social participation, and that participants met and socialised more frequently and felt more involved in the community as a result (Ōta et al. 2021, 1).

Despite growing interest in this topic, there is little consensus among researchers on who is most affected. Loneliness and social isolation are hard to measure and the approaches and tools for assessment vary greatly, as there

is no standard method, either internationally or nationally. According to a recent report by the World Health Organization (WHO), there is no agreement about whether factors such as age and gender create an increased risk for loneliness (2021, 3). A brief examination of studies on loneliness in Japan illustrates this lack of consensus. While Khan and Kadoya (2021) conclude that older people (both men and women) with higher incomes and young women were particularly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, Stickley and Ueda (2022) argue that the main factors contributing to a higher risk were being young, male and socioeconomically disadvantaged. There does, however, appear to be agreement on the prevalence of loneliness among people living in long-term care institutions compared to those living in the community (WHO 2021, 3; Schofield 2021).

In order to understand the situation in Aso, the efforts of various actors, activities, initiatives, policies and measures aimed at combating loneliness and promoting social participation need to be investigated. To assess this rather complex topic, a simple distinction between state actors and civil society is insufficient as demonstrated by Haddad (2011) in her application of the state-in-society approach to the Japanese social welfare regime. In Japan, the government has long cooperated with non-profit actors for the provision of welfare, creating closely intertwined and mutually beneficial relations (Haddad 2011, 39). Local volunteer groups have been an important part of the Japanese social welfare system since the beginning of the twentieth century (Hastings 1995, 18–23), and the relationship between the Japanese government and such groups is more a partnership than a top-down hierarchy (Rosario 2009, 314). In 1998, the implementation of the Special Non-Profit Organisation Law (NPO Law) led to a massive increase in the number of groups providing local social welfare services (Haddad 2011, 43). The government assists these voluntary organisations both administratively and financially and encourages local communities to form such groups (Haddad 2011, 40). In Aso, the existence of such government-guided volunteer organisations means that a strict separation between the spheres of state and civil society cannot be made when analysing policy-making processes.

A central role within the institutions in Aso and other rural areas is played by local social welfare councils known as *shakai fukushi kyōgikai* (hereafter *shakyō*). Haddad describes these councils as “quasi-governmental associations that brought city officials together with community leaders concerned with social welfare issues” (2011, 35). They are established in every administrative district across Japan, including Nishihara-*mura*, Aso-*shi* and Taka-

*mori-machi*, the targets of our research (Zenshakyō n.d.a). Typically, their members are representatives of the local authorities, neighbourhood associations and registered volunteer groups (Haddad 2011, 35). In addition, the government appoints private individuals as social welfare commissioners (*minsei iin*) for every administrative district in the country (Kōseirōdōshō n.d.a), who help to communicate the needs and concerns of the community and its individual members to local authorities. Hashimoto and Takahashi describe *minsei iin* as a “link between the local administrative authority, social welfare institutions and residents” (1997, 303), exemplifying the blurred boundaries between public, private and voluntary work in Japan (see Estévez-Abe 2003).

The *shakyō* initiates, coordinates and supports activities on the municipal level and below. Initiatives launched by the *shakyō* are often supported by volunteers from within the community, who receive training and often resources. The aim is that eventually the volunteers, and thus the community itself, will start to carry out the activities autonomously (Zenshakyō n.d.b). The role of the *minsei iin* is clearly defined by the Civil Affairs Committee Law and mainly involves providing social welfare institutions with advice and information. In order to do this, they carry out *mimamori* (watching over, guarding) activities, which consist mainly of home visits to assess the living conditions, needs and concerns of residents (Kōseirōdōshō n.d.b). Generally speaking, the *shakyō* focuses on collective activities while *minsei iin*, aside from their coordinating function, provide individual services through their home visits.

Another potentially important strategy against loneliness (especially among older adults) is the establishment of community clubs known as *fureai ikiiki salon* (gatherings for lively mutual connection). The Japanese term *fureai* describes connectedness between two or more people, while *ikiiki* conveys a sense of liveliness and vigor. At these “salons”, local residents (mostly elderly people) can engage with each other on a regular basis (monthly or in some cases weekly) and build a sense of community through playing games, drinking tea or partaking in sport and cultural activities together (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 100–1). All salons are private, non-profit-making operations run by residents, volunteers and sometimes other relevant organisations. Some are set up independently by residents, while others are supported and organised by the local *shakyō* (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 100). *Fureai salon* can be found in communities throughout Japan, and the Aso region boasts a comprehensive network.

Given these blurred boundaries between public, private and voluntary work, we investigate the actors involved in social welfare provision in Aso based on their organisational and historical background, their purpose, role and tasks. The aforementioned link between loneliness and social participation is an important factor for our research to understand why and how these organisations have acted and what initiatives they have set up. To assess their mutual interdependence, we apply the state-in-society approach presented by Haddad (2011) and aim to show how the priorities and approaches of the actors, as well as their interdependencies, have changed during the pandemic. We also highlight possible future strategies that are being developed in the fight against loneliness.

### **Awareness, flexibility and cooperation: Solutions to intensifying issues?**

In Aso, the two main problems that are currently perceived as threatening and restricting social participation are the long-standing issues of ageing and depopulation and the recent pandemic restrictions. Both of these weaken social cohesion and ultimately lead to increased loneliness with all its negative impacts. Due to the pandemic and social distancing, there have been significant changes in interaction between the actors and the community, the actors amongst themselves, and the members of the community. All our interview partners voiced similar concerns about the cancellation of social activities and gatherings since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. Various stakeholders confirmed that there has been a considerable rise in loneliness during the last years:

Because of this [the cancellation of social activities and gatherings], there are people who cannot have errands done and cannot talk with others, so yes, there are a lot of people who are lonely, who have become lonely. (Interview with Nishihara Shakyō 2022)

Due to governmental social distancing recommendations, opportunities for individuals to engage in social interaction have been severely limited. This particularly affects rural areas in Aso, as the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing trends in the region. As a consequence, we noted an increase in institutional dependency based on various observations, including a significant increase in consultation requests addressed to the *shakyō* and its sub-organisations, and more people appearing to feel they have to “give up” their

independence and enter care institutions. The *shakyō* representatives also explained that they have noticed a marked increase in the number of people who are “considering” entering these institutions. This emphasises the importance of the *fureai salon* which offer supplementary activities to professional care which is part of the national care insurance scheme (e.g., care institutions) and fulfil a preventive role in care dependency.

All actors appear to be reacting to the new developments by shifting their strategic focus and adapting existing policies as well as creating new ones. While bearing in mind that institutions are geared to raising their profile, the *shakyō* has intensified its efforts in gathering and sharing information through cooperation with its sub-organisations and other actors like the *minsei iin*. However, as a result of the pandemic, it is not only community events that have been disrupted or suspended, but also meetings and training of actors involved in social welfare such as the *minsei iin* and new volunteers. This led us to identify individual *mimamori* activities (monitoring fellow members of a community) as the most important tool against loneliness during the present pandemic. Due to the need to adapt to COVID-19 preventive measures, interactions with and between residents on an individual level gained importance as larger gatherings became problematic. These activities aimed at the individual are mainly performed by *minsei iin* and volunteers, but some are carried out directly by the *shakyō*, e.g., their mini day services (*mini dei sabisu*; activities similar to salons but organised solely by the *shakyō*).

In addition, we found a high level of awareness and concern among social welfare actors and stakeholders in Aso regarding the long-term effects of both the pandemic and population decline on community activities, as well as on financial and psychological issues. One *shakyō* representative was concerned that these developments might inflict lasting damage on the social structure:

It hasn't been possible to hold festivals and other events [...] The opportunities for such gatherings have been decreasing. Because of that, seeing people's faces and knowing whether the other person is doing fine or not, those kinds of relationships have been getting weaker. If this goes on longer, a third or a fourth year, I'm worried that people will give up organising such gatherings and that they might disappear completely. (Interview with Aso Shakyō 2022)

Beyond that, we were able to observe tensions between the local government and other key actors in the organisation of community activities. Being closely affiliated with the government, *shakyō* representatives expressed a sense of



“not really being able to act” (*nakanaka ugokenai*), as they have to closely follow government guidelines regarding the pandemic (Interview with Nishi-hara Shakyō 2022). However, local volunteer associations and ward mayors have urged the necessity for autonomous decisions to be made concerning community activities, as after more than two years of the pandemic they feel that the need for human contact that such activities provide should be increasingly prioritised over the fear of possible criticism and social condemnation.

Regarding the structure of the actors involved in social welfare in Aso, we found that they are organised as a complex cooperative network intent on promoting social participation in the community despite the current challenges. Each *shakyō* assumes a key role as a connector, raising awareness and cooperation among the village-structured communities and other state actors (local governments), semi-state actors (social welfare institutions, sub-organisations, *minsei iin*) and non-state actors (volunteers, NPOs). They are responsible for information gathering, the coordination and guidance of local groups and the financial distribution of government funds.

Network cooperation is an essential factor in developing and promoting community activities, and it defines the relationships of actors with each other and the community. One example of a network system established for official social welfare organisations in Aso is the Yamabiko Network, which is a platform on which all seven municipal councils of social welfare in the Aso region have been promoting cooperation (*tasukeai*) and support (*sasaeai*) since 1997 based on the concept of the “Aso Block” (Aso *burokku shakyō*). With the overall aim of increasing social exchange and collaboration in the social welfare system, the municipal councils encourage people to pay attention to individual members of a community, focusing on the most vulnerable groups (from the *shakyō*’s perspective): the elderly, children and people with disabilities (Aso *burokku shakai fukushi kyōgikai rengōkai* 2022). Their success in making people more aware in their everyday lives of being part of a community is one of the main reasons they cite for Aso’s outstanding track record in managing natural disasters such as the Kumamoto earthquake in 2016.

## Discussion

Our research confirms that organised community-building activities in Aso—discussion meetings, salon activities and smaller neighbourhood “helping” services to name but a few—serve the two main purposes observed by Miyake and Iseki (2014): Firstly, they aim to increase social participation and strengthen the community through encouraging interaction between res-

idents, volunteers and local organisations. Such interaction targets the reduction of loneliness and isolation, increasing the exchange of information within and between regional communities, while also monitoring the health of members of the community and providing them with opportunities for physical and mental exercise. These practices thus effectively tackle a range of social issues in local communities through utilising and prioritising human bonds (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 102). Secondly, their purpose is to create a framework in which the organised community activities function as a base for developing a resident-led community welfare system (Miyake / Iseki 2014). In Aso, the monthly meetings (weekly in some parts of Nishihara-*mura*) include health-related activities such as light fitness exercises and dietary advice, as well as cultural and educational events. The types of activities that are held depend on the needs of the local community and target different groups (Miyake / Iseki 2014, 102).

The various actors involved in providing social welfare in Aso appear to move in a constant state of tension between government control and self-determination. Making the transition from a civil organisation to an NPO eligible to receive government funds can result in less autonomy when it comes to policy making. Volunteer groups tend to enjoy greater flexibility as they are independent of government structures but often have less means and resources to draw upon to offer their services (Haddad 2011, 37–9). In this regard, we observed great variation between the different regions and organisations in Aso. For example, the *fureai salon* in Nishihara-*mura* work more closely with the *shakyō* and follow government guidelines more strictly than their counterparts in Aso-*shi* or Takamori-*machi*. They also report regularly to the *shakyō*. Consequently, it has been more difficult for them to adapt to the pandemic, as they were forced to suspend their activities due to government-imposed social distancing measures.

Another key issue in the context of the pandemic is the lack of digital literacy among the elderly, which excludes them from an increasingly important alternative to face-to-face communication. This results in a widening of the digital gap. During the pandemic, much of the interpersonal interaction worldwide was relocated to the online sphere, including professional social welfare services as well as work and everyday communication with family and friends. Residents of communities in rural regions—Aso being no exception—are particularly affected by the digital divide, as their use of online communication during the pandemic has been much more limited than that of, for instance, younger residents in urban regions. According to representa-

tives of the Takamori-*machi* and Aso-*shi shakyō*, this is the result of a lack of digital literacy rather than any problem with the internet infrastructure. This is also another possible reason why face-to-face *mimamori* activities have gained in relevance.

To conclude, activities to prevent loneliness in the Aso region can be understood as a combined response to the long-term social challenges in rural Japan and the acute needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Network structures enable cooperation and allow for a more efficient provision of social welfare to the residents of a certain region or community. Haddad describes the expansion of networking among social welfare service providers as “one of the greatest areas of innovation” (2011, 41), as it brings together ideas from a diverse range of groups. It also ensures different channels of communication (organisers, volunteers, residents themselves) with the people in need of their services and makes implementation easier as representatives of all the relevant groups are involved, thus creating a shared sense of responsibility (Haddad 2011, 42–3). By exploring the organisational network in Aso, it has become evident that close cooperation and communication between the actors are key factors in dealing with the pressing issues, of which loneliness is undoubtedly a central problem.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted not only loneliness in Aso but also the actors engaged in activities to combat it. The role of intermediaries like the *minsei iin* has gained in importance as emphasis was shifted to individual visits rather than social gatherings due to the lower risk of infection. Our research shows that actors adapted to the new situation created by the pandemic by focusing on existing activities such as *mimamori* and mini day services which could be maintained despite COVID-19 restrictions, while also strengthening their cooperation with other organisations, initiatives and the community. Finally, we concluded from our research that these adaptations were a key factor in keeping the social welfare system functioning in the face of increasing pressure during the pandemic. The developments observed during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate the importance of continuously thinking of new approaches, adapting existing ones and switching emphasis between activities to the ones that most effectively enable social workers and volunteers to engage with the ever-changing challenges associated with the problem of loneliness.

## Reflections on the project

Being part of this research project was overall a great experience. In the initial preparatory part during the previous semester, as is often the case at the very beginning of a research project, we were not sure where it was going to lead. However, the closer we got to the end of the semester and the hands-on excursion part of the project, the more we came out of our shell and felt that we could actually contribute. As the Aso project has been going on for many years at our department, it seemed at first like an overwhelmingly massive and intangible undertaking. However, thanks to the guidance of our lecturers and everybody's help and support it appeared increasingly manageable, and our project started to take shape. During the virtual excursion itself, we had various opportunities to become familiar with methodical fieldwork skills like conducting interviews and applying the knowledge we had acquired in the preparatory phase to dig deeper into our topic of interest. During that process, we also got to know each other better and learned about our strengths and weaknesses, which helped immensely in overcoming the challenges we faced in dealing with this type of project. Some group members were good at managing and filtering data, some were good at coming up with creative ideas, while others were good at making the best use of the available technology and other resources. One of our member's strength was on the linguistic side, which is why his responsibilities lay mostly with translation, reading Japanese texts for our research and taking care of email exchange with our contacts in Japan. While he believes he was able to do that reasonably well, he would have had a hard time without his partner Katja, who was the actual leader of the operation. Especially during interviews, it helped to have her organise our data so that the other member could focus on what he and our interview partners said. If we had not worked together so well, there would probably have been a few times when we would have asked questions that had already been answered.

While we are sure we would all have preferred face-to-face on-site research in Japan, we believe that online research was a good starting point for us as student researchers. Despite that, there were of course many problems that we had to face. One major limitation of our online research was gaining access to people in the region, especially the elderly people who are directly affected by the developments we were investigating. Most of them are not proficient in using online communication tools or the internet and computers in general. Another problem is that due to the lack of any personal interaction beforehand they may have been worried about not being able to

communicate properly. All they would have known about us is that we are not Japanese, which often leads to the presumption that we do not speak Japanese well, if at all. If we had been able to meet them face to face, it would have been easier to create an environment of mutual trust conducive to personal interaction and we could have more easily reassured them that there was no need to be nervous or to worry about wasting our time—which seemed to be an occurring issue. Despite all these challenges, there were aspects of online research that were helpful. Because of the virtual barrier between us and our interview partners, we were able to coordinate ourselves and our questions more easily without our in-group communication interfering with the flow of the interviews. We believe another advantage was that our interview partners were more comfortable with having their video recorded as we were already using video communications as our tool for the interview, whereas otherwise they might have only been comfortable with an audio recording or might have requested no recording at all.

## References

- Aso burokkū shakai fukushi kyōgikai rengōkai. 2022. “Yamabiko nettowāku to wa?” やまびこネットワークとは? [What is the Yamabiko network?]. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.asoyamabiko.jp/about/>.
- Braun, Virginia / Clarke, Victoria. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Estévez-Abe, Margarita. 2003. “State-society Partnerships in the Japanese Welfare State.” In *The State of Civil Society in Japan*, edited by Frank J. Schwartz / Susan J. Pharr, 154–72. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ge, Lixia / Yap, Chun Wei / Heng, Bee Hoon. 2022. “Associations of Social Isolation, Social Participation, and Loneliness with Frailty in Older Adults in Singapore: A Panel Data Analysis.” *BMC Geriatrics* 22, no. 26. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-021-02745-2>.
- Haddad, Mary Alice. 2011. “A State-in-Society Approach to the Nonprofit Sector: Welfare Services in Japan.” *Voluntas* 22, no. 1: 26–47.
- Hashimoto, Raija / Takahashi, Mutsuko. 1997. “Minsei i’in—Between Public and Private: A Local Network for Community Care in Japan.” *International Social Work* 40, no. 3: 303–14.
- Hastings, Sally Ann. 1995. *Neighborhood and Nation in Tokyo, 1905–1937*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press.
- Inagaki, Tristen / Muscatell, Keely / Moieni, Mona / Dutcher, Janine / Jevtic, Ivana / Irwin, Michael / Eisenberger, Naomi. 2016. “Yearning for Connection? Loneliness Is Associated With Increased Ventral Striatum Activity to Close Others.” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 11, no. 7: 1096–101.
- Jewett, Rae L. / Mah, Sarah M. / Howell, Nicholas / Larsen, Mandi M. 2021. “Social Cohesion and Community Resilience During COVID-19 and Pandemics: A Rapid Scoping Review to Inform the United Nations Research Roadmap for COVID-19 Recovery.” *International Journal of Health Services* 51, no. 3: 325–36.
- Khan, Mostafa Saidur Rahim / Kadoya, Yoshihiko. 2021. “Loneliness during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparison between Older and Younger People.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 15: 7871. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18157871.
- Kōsei-rōdōshō 厚生労働省. n.d.a. “Minsei iin, jidō iin ni tsuite” 民生委員・児童委員について [About civilian welfare commissioners and child welfare commissioners]. Accessed July 7, 2022. [https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/hukushi\\_kaigo/seikatsuhogo/minseiiin/index.html](https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/hukushi_kaigo/seikatsuhogo/minseiiin/index.html).

- Kōseirōdōshō 厚生労働省. n.d.b. “Minsei iin, jidō iin wa dono yō na katsudō o shite iru no desu ka?” 民生委員・児童委員はどのような活動をしているのですか? [What kind of activities do the commissioners for social welfare and children's services carry out?]. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/seikatsuhogo/minseiiin01/qa03.html>.
- Lützel, Ralph / Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian. 2020. „Introduction: Japan's New Ruralities.” In *Japan's New Ruralities: Coping with Decline in the Periphery*, edited by Wolfram Manzenreiter / Ralph Lützel / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 1–12. Abingdon, Oxon: New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miserka, Antonia. 2020. “The Role of Internal Migration in Sustaining Rural Communities in Japan: The Case of Aso City in Kumamoto.” *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies* 12: 1–30.
- Miyake, Yasunari 三宅康成 / Iseki, Takahiro 井関崇博. 2014. “Nōson chiiki ni okeru ‘fureai salon’ no jittai to kadaï” 農村地域における「ふれあいサロン」の実態と課題 [Actual conditions and subjects of community salon in rural area [sic]]. *Hyōgo kenritsu daigaku kankyō ningen gakubu kenkyū hōkoku* 兵庫県立大学環境人間学部研究報告 [University of Hyōgo Faculty of Environmental and Human Studies, research report] 16: 99–109.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 2020. “Elderly Population.” Accessed July 25, 2022. <https://data.oecd.org/pop/elderly-population.htm>.
- Ōta, Ryūichi / Yata, Akiko / Arakawa, Yuki / Maiguma, Kōichi / Sano, Chiaki. 2021. “Rural Social Participation Through osekai During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 11: 1–9.
- Rezaeipandari, Hassan / Ravaei, Jafar / Bahrevar, Vali / Mirrezaei, Somayeh / Morowatisharifabad, Mohammad. 2020. “Social Participation and Loneliness Among Older Adults in Yazd, Iran.” *Health & Social Care in the Community* 28, no. 6: 2076–85.
- Rosario, Laratta. 2009. “Hand in Hand or Under the Thumb? A New Perspective on Social Welfare in Japan.” *Social Policy and Society: A Journal of the Social Policy Association* 8, no. 3: 307–17.
- Schofield, Patricia. 2021. “Loneliness in Care Homes, Is it a Phenomenon? And What Can We Do to Improve the Situation?” *Evidence-based Nursing* 24: 127.
- Statistical Handbook of Japan. 2022. “3. Declining Birth Rate and Aging Population.” Accessed October 2, 2022. <https://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/c0117.html>.
- Stickley, Andrew / Ueda, Michiko. 2022. “Loneliness in Japan During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Prevalence, Correlates and Association with Mental Health.” *Psychiatry Research* 307: 1–6.
- World Health Organization (WHO). 2021. *Social Isolation and Loneliness Among Older People: Advocacy Brief*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- Zenshakyō. n.d.a. “Hōjingaiyō” 法人概要 [Corporate profile]. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.shakyo.or.jp/tsuite/gaiyo/index.html>.
- Zenshakyō. n.d.b. “Shakai fukushi kyōgikai to wa” 社会福祉協議会とは [What is the social welfare council?]. Accessed July 7, 2022. <https://www.shakyo.or.jp/recruit/about/index.html>.



JOHANNA MAYR  
LENKA MIYANOHARA  
BENEDIKT SCHULTZ

## Tanoshimi ga nakunatta: Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social activities in the Aso region

Festivities and village activities create social connections between individuals within a community (NPO A 2022), by providing opportunities for local residents to meet and enjoy themselves and maintain connections with each other. When a pandemic forces important social activities to be held in different ways or stopped completely, social connections will arguably be strongly influenced and possibly changed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our daily lives were shaped by new restrictions and regulations, including body temperature being measured when entering a building, wearing masks, shifting much of our lives to the online sphere, cancelling social gatherings and implementing lockdowns. This situation, of course, took its toll on the everyday lives of people living in the Aso region in Japan as well, influencing the region's social structures and how village residents evaluate the necessity and feasibility of their traditions, festivals and other social activities. In this short article, we examine the impact of the pandemic on social activities, such as Japanese traditional festivals (*matsuri*), the traditional burning of the grasslands (*noyaki*) (Ōtsu 2016, 370; Wilhelm 2020, 223–4) and other communal activities, for example cleaning days, when local residents cut weeds along the roads.

Our research dealt with changes that occurred in the activities of social organisations and in the ways the traditions of the Aso region are carried out due to the COVID-19 pandemic. How and why did these social activities change? What effect do these changes have on the local community? In terms of its impact on social activities, how does the pandemic compare to natural disasters that the people of Aso have experienced in the past?

Unfortunately, travel restrictions prevented us from visiting Aso in person, so we had to move our project into the digital space. In the course of our online research, we conducted numerous interviews with various actors



within the Aso region. These interviews included one-on-one interviews with experts and local residents and group interviews with representatives of local cultural associations, administrations and NPOs. We used Thematic Analysis (Braun / Clarke 2022) to analyse and process our data. This enabled us to search through our data set to identify, analyse and report recurring patterns. We used this method to describe our qualitative data and interpret our selected codes and constructed themes (Braun / Clarke 2022, 8–10).

We start with an overview of the existing research literature on the cultural and social activities in rural areas, including the Aso region, which served as a background for our study. After reviewing the literature, we present our findings. We found that the pandemic had negative effects both on community opportunities to generate social cohesion and the transmission of traditions. It has also led to a loss of opportunities to relax and have fun. Furthermore, the pandemic has proven to be rather different from any natural disaster Aso has faced before. We have also confirmed that the rapid aging and the decline in population in Aso has acted as an additional challenge to the pandemic. We end by reflecting on the research project and the experiences we have made.

## Literature review

There is a significant amount of literature available on the topics of our study, including traditions and *matsuri* in rural Japan. Earlier studies focused on the documentation and categorisation of festivities, their ritual aspects and performances. More recent research looks at the socio-cultural purpose and significance of customs and traditions in the community and also discusses the social function of traditions in relation to social cohesion, economic benefits and questions of authenticity (Lahournat 2016, 186–7; Okubo et al. 2014, 1126). This is also the approach our study takes by focussing on the societal aspects of traditions and customs. Okubo Kenji and his team describe the social value of festivals as mainly being a key opportunity to take part in social gatherings and mingle with locals (Okubo et al 2014, 1131). Other studies have found that social participation plays a great role in the well-being and sense of self of participants (Lee 2013; Roemer 2010). We aim to expand on the understanding of the social aspects of traditions and festivities in Aso when faced with a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

We hypothesise that the pandemic poses a risk to rural communities in Japan. Another risk to be considered—one that has already received much attention—is the declining and ageing rural population. Previous studies have found that increasing numbers of elderly inhabitants and depopulation in

rural areas in Japan pose a problem for the continuation of local traditions and festivities, as the preservation and transmission of traditions to the next generation is endangered (Lahournat 2016; Thelen 2015; Traphagan 2000; Yamashita 2021). When it comes to Aso, not only immaterial traditions, but also the physical continuation of the grasslands, which are shaped by cultural practices (*noyaki*), are at risk of disappearing due to the declining population. Volunteer organisations and private foundations are trying to cover for the lack of people (Ötsu 2016; Wilhelm 2022). Further studies link the disappearance of *matsuri* to a loss of local identity. When these activities disappear, the sense of community and belonging weakens as well. The help of volunteers and interactions with the locals are essential for saving and preserving the local traditions (Okubo et al. 2014; Thelen 2015).

The resilience of local communities in Aso when faced with natural disasters has already been described by prior research. After major natural disasters hit the region, such as the torrential rains of 2012 or the 2016 Kumamoto Earthquake, residents immediately began actions to help each other. They considered the continuation of traditional festivities essential (Abe / Murakami 2020; Yamashita 2021). These findings will be instrumental in our comparison of the pandemic with other natural disasters the Aso region has faced.

With the pandemic restricting the assembling of larger crowds, we assume that if the elderly are no longer able to continue with local traditions, the ageing society will catalyse the disappearance of these social activities and traditions. Furthermore, the current situation heavily influences the way local traditions are executed, which in our opinion has a strong impact on the sense of community in Aso. As we have outlined above, our study continues and expands on already existing research. Contrary to the mentioned articles, our paper takes a more general approach to social activities and does not focus on just one of the many activities in the Aso region.

*Noyaki* has also been the topic of much research. Wilhelm provides a detailed look at the workings of local community life, the history of *noyaki* and agricultural development in the Aso region (Wilhelm 2020, 242–3). An up-to-date overview is provided by Yokogawa (2021), who collected information on *noyaki* in other prefectures of Japan as well, and found that many grassland burnings have been cancelled and others have been carried out with restrictions. Yokogawa worries that this may impact both the safety of future burns and the biodiversity of grasslands (Yokogawa 2021, 107). Takeuchi and Shimada (2021) investigated the impact of the pandemic on *noyaki* in the Aso region, focusing on volunteer activities that continued during the pandemic.

This was made possible to a considerable degree by an established system for risk management, coordination by the volunteer organisation and the organisation's flexibility. Furthermore, COVID-19 safety precautions were taken while working, like measuring body temperature and maintaining a prescribed distance (Takeuchi / Shimada 2021, 19–20). We would like to contribute to the existing research by investigating how local community ties within the Aso region have been affected by cancellations and changes to *noyaki* and other forms of social activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Findings

The pandemic has had a great impact on how social activities in the Aso region are carried out. Most were not cancelled entirely, but instead held under different parameters. Some 2021 festivities, such as the *dondoya*, were postponed due to social restrictions enacted by the prefectural administration. Others chose to limit attendance by allowing only a select group of participants. Certain conditions proved to be of utmost significance in the decision-making process regarding if and how an event was carried out: season, year, type of social restrictions in effect at the time, current number of people infected, and whether the event could be held outdoors or not (Interview Expert B 2022).

Social activities are crucial to forming strong social cohesion, which contributes to a greater degree of autonomy in the village (Interview Expert B 2022; Lahournat 2016, 186–7). It is also seen as an important factor in enabling residents to carry out hard work such as *noyaki* and its preparation (Interviewee A 2022). However, if social activities are not performed continuously, they lose their effectiveness (Interview Expert B 2022). For this reason, many activities—including *noyaki*—were still carried out during the pandemic. The public was often excluded from the festivities, with only a small group of actors performing the rituals to keep the tradition alive (Interview Expert B 2022).

To elaborate, Japanese festivities can be separated into two parts: the rituals (*shinji*) and the celebration (*shinshingyōji* or *hōshukugyōji*). The rituals are performed inside the shrine by a select group of people in a restricted area. Following the rituals, the celebration begins. In the case of festivities involving the carrying of portable shrines (*mikoshi*), this means a procession is being held. In contrast to the rituals, everyone is allowed to attend the procession (Interview Expert A 2022). During the pandemic, only the rituals were continued and the celebration was left out, as was the case with the *tanomisai*

(Interview Expert B 2022). Some festivals, like the *hifuri matsuri*, were continued with no such changes (Interview Expert B 2022).

One of our sources commented that, without the sensory memory of attending the event, the effect of creating social cohesion in the community was diminished (Interview Expert B 2022). One of our interviewees lamented: “As drinking became impossible or rare, it started to feel like relationships with my friends were more distanced, a very lonely feeling”. He explained that “while it is possible to have a drink with friends online, similar to the conversation we are having now, it is still lonely” (Interviewee A 2022). Most residents do not have access or a need for digital devices (Interview Expert B 2022). It became apparent to us that the pandemic has had a negative effect on opportunities for a community to generate social cohesion and that, while several private activities were held using online tools, community events did not see a shift to digital spaces.

Some interviewees stated a fear that the pandemic could cause certain festivities or gatherings to disappear, diminishing relationships in the community (Aso Shakyō 2022). One person worried that once festivities and activities are stopped, they can no longer be passed on to the next generation, seeming to refer to the problem of traditional knowledge dying out with the ageing population (NPO A 2022; Aso Shakyō 2022). One of our informants put it as follows, “once cancelled, participants will start to feel like it isn’t necessary to continue holding the event or activity anymore (Interviewee A 2022). Lahournat describes depopulation and ageing as endangering the transmission and preservation of local traditions (2016, 186). The pandemic seems to be a similar risk factor, as interviewees feared that cancellations due to the pandemic might lead to the permanent loss of certain traditions. It seems that while this worry about disappearing festivals and traditions already existed before the pandemic, it is necessary to consider the effects of the pandemic on the continuity of such events, as the chance that traditions are interrupted and discontinued is increased.

Reducing social activities to a smaller scale also meant that they were less fun and there were fewer opportunities to interact. One of our informants described it fittingly as “there is no fun anymore” (*tanoshimi ga nakunatta*, Interviewee A 2022), which means that social events which people used to anticipate and look forward to throughout the year disappeared. “An increasing number of festivals in our district have disappeared recently due to the ageing of the population. This has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. So actually, it feels a little bit like there is a sentiment developing that this [sit-

uation] is bad” (Interviewee A 2022). Even if the activities are continued, they might be drastically changed, like a local village’s *bon-odori* festival “as there are currently no singers in the village, participants would have to dance without music and can therefore no longer dance” (Interviewee A 2022). These festivals and activities were generally considered a fun break from the hard work throughout the year (Interviewee A 2022).

A local resident we talked to in a group interview lamented that there were fewer drinking parties, which he considered crucial in forming relationships and being able to speak freely (NPO A 2022). This is similar to the worry of traditions disappearing in that even before the pandemic there was unease about local community life becoming less enjoyable. During a group interview, one participant connected local culture to local happiness, explaining that “while it is about passing on the local culture, there is also a role of increasing local happiness” (NPO A 2022). This in turn means that increased event cancellations not only lead to difficulties in preserving local traditions but also to the loss of fun and local happiness that is related to these events.

The pandemic has proven itself to be very different from the natural disasters the Aso region has previously faced. High social cohesion in the village led to greater resilience in times of disaster (Aso Shakyō 2022; Abe / Murakami 2020, 37). However, due to social distancing, it was not possible to overcome the pandemic by working together directly. Everyone was on their own and could no longer rely on the assistance and emotional support of their community. Additionally, the pandemic did not lead to visible damages that could be directly addressed (Aso Shakyō 2022). However, some have also voiced the opinion that the prior experience with natural disasters allowed residents to react calmly and with composure in face of the pandemic (Takamori Shakyō 2022). As one local stated, even though both the pandemic and natural disasters are equally destructive, natural disasters seem to have a positive effect on community strength through the collective work of rebuilding. In contrast, the pandemic seems to have had a very destructive effect on community strength (Interviewee A 2022).

In conclusion, there was consensus between our interview partners that there is a clear difference between natural disasters and the pandemic. However, some believed that experiences gained from natural disasters affected personal coping capacities for the pandemic. Abe and Murakami made similar observations: The communities of the investigated wards Kawagoda and Kase were able to fall back on social bonds formed during their many social activities during the year and their previous experience

with a flood disaster during recovery from the 2016 earthquake (Abe / Murakami 2020, 29, 37).

We confirmed that the rapidly ageing and declining population has also been an additional challenge in the continuation of social activities in Aso (Aso Shakyō 2022). A local resident showed us pictures of yearly and monthly gatherings held in his village, clubs dedicated to flower growing and other activities where there were only elderly participants. While some participants are in their 30s and 40s, and there is one event specifically targeting children, there were no events held for younger people in general in his village (Interviewee A 2022).

To conclude our case study, we found that the pandemic has had an impact on social cohesion and community strength. This occurred due to the cancellation of events and festivals along with the limitation of opportunities to exchange socially with fellow locals. Both aspects are important in generating a sense of community. Furthermore, “locals working together means they can freely enjoy the fun of collective work” (NPO A 2022). Local work, such as ward cleaning or *noyaki*, increases the enjoyment of community life. We found that in terms of religious activities, there are certain aspects that simply must be held and that these took place as best as possible in accordance with rules and restrictions. On the other hand, aspects performed for the community were often cancelled. This separation can be described by the Japanese terms *shinji* and *shinshingyōji*. It appears that natural disasters and the pandemic are perceived differently, although both caused great economic and social damage.

## Reflections on the research project

The Aso 2022 Winter Field School was divided by topic into four smaller groups. We worked together on both levels, in the individual groups and as a whole. We supported each other and exchanged information: For example, if one of us came across an aspect that might be important for another group, we would mark, send or point it out to them. We participated in the group interviews together and coordinated who and what we would ask. We respected each other's focal areas and deferred the spotlight when another group had more important questions to ask.

Group meetings and workshops helped us focus on our work and develop our teamwork skills. In our personal experience, the option to go to the classroom physically boosted our experience and gave us a stronger feeling of be-

ing involved. Being there, we could also ask our research project leaders for advice and input. Their knowledge and insight helped us on many occasions.

We shared all responsibilities within our team, with everyone involved in all steps of the process. We divided the workload equally and were in constant communication with each other. All of us attended all interviews and each of us asked questions. We transcribed equal amounts of the interviews and coded them as a group. Organisational meetings helped us stay on track and maintain an overview of the project.

Although access to the field was limited to our device screens, we were also aware that hybrid research is very likely to become an important method in the future. The experience therefore provided us with a necessary basis for future academic work. Naturally, not being able to communicate directly with the locals influenced our collected data. Though this was a limitation, we would not otherwise have been able to collect any data at all. Thus, hybrid online research actually decreased the distance between us as researchers and our subjects in Aso. One drawback of online research is the way it filters. Not all people in Aso can be reached online or by the people that generously assisted our research team on site. This meant that members of the local community that may have been crucial in answering our research questions were excluded.

We had to heavily rely on connections established before the project took place, not only in terms of finding residents willing to participate in interviews, but also in order to get an understanding of the local area. We were lucky to have locals willing to carry around a smartphone outside during a video call so that we could see some of the landscape. We feel that remote online research is arguably only effectively possible with strong connections like these in place, while traditional fieldwork might also be accomplished by establishing connections after entering the field. On the other hand, online research, when done correctly, offers an opportunity to students and researchers alike to access a wider variety of research topics by reducing and removing restrictions like being physically in the field.

During our project, we learned that both the traditional methods and remote online research have their merits. As such, careful consideration should be put into the questions of what and how one wants to research, and into weighing whether said topic can be researched remotely (or if it may even be better to research remotely) or if the project would strongly profit from a direct, physical approach. We look forward to utilising both approaches in our future work!



## References

- Abe, Miwa 阿部美和 / Murakami, Takeshi 村上長嗣. 2020. "Nōson shūraku ni okeru kurashi no henka to kumamoto jishin: Minami-Aso mura Kawagoda-ku Kase-ku no jirei kara" 農村集落におけるくらしの変化と熊本地震～南阿蘇村川後田区加勢区の事例から～ [Changes in life in rural villages and the Kumamoto Earthquake: A case study of Kawagoda ward in Minami-Aso and Kase ward]. *Kumamoto Daigaku* 熊本大学 [Kumamoto University]: 29–39. [https://www.kumamoto-u.ac.jp/kenkyuu\\_sangakurenkei](https://www.kumamoto-u.ac.jp/kenkyuu_sangakurenkei).
- Braun, Virginia / Clarke, Victoria. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Los Angeles / London / New Delhi / Singapore / Washington DC / Melbourne: SAGE.
- Lahournat, Florence. 2016. "Reviving Tradition in Disaster-Affected Communities: Adaptation and Continuity in the Kagura of Ogatsu, Miyagi Prefecture." *Contemporary Japan* 28, no. 2: 185–207. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cj-2016-0010>.
- Lee, William. 2013. "Whose Festival Is It? Patterns of Participation in the Japanese Matsuri." *Paragrana* 22, no. 1: 165–79.
- Okubo, Kenji / Gardebroek, Cornelis / Heijman, Wim. 2014. "Research Note: The Economic Values and Roles of Rural Festivals in Japan." *Tourism Economics* 20, no. 5: 1125–32. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5367/te.2013.0344>.
- Ōtsu, Eri 大津愛梨. 2016. "Kumamoto jishin zengo no Aso ni okeru 'sekai nōgyō isan' no imi—Aso ga hokoru minkan no torikumi" 熊本地震前後の阿蘇における「世界農業遺産」の意味—阿蘇が誇る民間の取組み [Grassroot Activities in Aso Before and After the Big Earthquake]. *Journal of Rural Planning Association* 35, no. 3: 369–74. <https://doi.org/10.2750/arp.35.369>.
- Roemer, Michael K. 2010. "Shinto Festival Involvement and Sense of Self in Contemporary Japan." *Japan Forum* 22, no. 3-4: 491–512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2010.533506>.
- Takeuchi, Ryo 竹内亮 / Shimada, Daisuke 嶋田大作. 2021. "Aso ni okeru noyaki shien borantia jigyō wa shinkei koronairusu kansenshō ni ikani taiō shitanoka: katsudō no keizoku yōin ni chūmoku shite" 阿蘇における野焼き支援ボランティア事業は 新型コロナウイルス感染症にいかに対応したのか—活動の継続要因に着目して— [How did the volunteer support project respond to the new coronavirus: Focus on the main factors for the continuation of the activities]. *Kankyō keizai seifu kenkyū* 環境経済・政策研究 [Environmental economy and politics research] 14, no. 1: 16–20.
- Thelen, Timo. 2015. "Connecting Academia and Furusato-zukuri in Rural Japan: The 'Festival Support Project' of Kanazawa University and Its Impact on a Village Community in the Noto Peninsula." *Human and Socio-Environmental Studies* 30: 171–93.
- Traphagan, John. 2000. *Taming Oblivion: Aging Bodies and the Fear of Senility in Japan*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Wilhelm, Johannes, 2020. "Das Grassland von Aso zwischen gesellschaftlicher Schrumpfung und Landschaftserhalt." In *Japan 2020 Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, edited by David Chiavacci / Iris Wiczorek, 222–49. München: Iudicium Verlag GmbH.
- Wilhelm, Johannes 2022. "Why Culture Matters: Analysis and social meanings in Aso, Japan." In *Asian Rural Future 2030*, edited by Kako Inoue / Izuru Saizen / Minori Tokito, 106–13. Tōkyō: Committee of International Affairs, The Association of Rural Planning, Japan.
- Yamashita, Ryōhei. 2021. "Saving Tradition in Japan: A Case Study of Local Opinions Regarding Urban University Students' Participation in Rural Festivals." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Regional Science* 5, no. 1: 125–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41685-020-00172-6>.
- Yokogawa, Masashi 横川昌史. 2021. "2020 nen ni shingata korona uirusu kansenshō no eikyō de chūshi ni natta hanshizensōgen no hiire no kiroku" 2020年に新型コロナウイルス感染症の影響で中止になった半自然草原の火入れの記録 [Records of cancelled spring burning of semi-natural grasslands in Japan due to the COVID-19 in 2020]. *Bulletin of the Osaka Museum of Natural History* 75: 107–11.



## Interviews

Aso Shakyō. 2022. "Group interview with the Aso Shakyō." Interview by the group. February 21, 2022.

Expert A. 2022. Interview by Lenka Miyanojara, Johanna Mayr and Benedikt Schultz. February 21, 2022.

Expert B. 2022. Interview by Lenka Miyanojara, Johanna Mayr and Benedikt Schultz. February 16, 2022.

NPO A. 2022. "Group interview with local NPO." Interview by the group. February 24, 2022.

Interviewee A. 2022. Interview by Benedikt Schultz, Lenka Miyanojara and Johanna Mayr. February 22, 2022.

Takamori Shakyō. 2022. "Group interview with the Takamori Shakyō." Interview by the group. February 17, 2022.

WILHELM MAN DONKO  
MELANIE STEINBRUGGER  
MAX FORTIN

## **The potential of remote areas: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the disaster-prone tourism sector of the Aso region in Japan**

The tourism sector was one of the hardest hit sectors in Japan during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (OECD 2020). This was especially true for Kumamoto prefecture's rural Aso region, where tourism is one of the main contributors to its economy and employment (Kubo 2021, 24). The region, which is situated within the circumference of a still active volcanic caldera, is prone to natural disasters, but its tourism sector has a proven track record of resilience in the face of such events. Results of an online survey that we conducted show that the local tourism industry considers itself proficient in coping with the aftermath of conventional natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. This raises the question of whether or not this resilience also applies to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper therefore aims to analyse the similarities and differences in attitudes and approaches when dealing with natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector of the Aso region. To achieve this, our team opted for a sequential mixed-methods approach. First, we conducted an online survey with 18 representatives of the tourism industry of the Aso region in order to gauge the state of the sector during natural disasters and the pandemic. To deepen our understanding of these findings, we then conducted three qualitative interviews with representatives on the forefront of the tourism sector in the region.

In the first section we examine the current existing academic literature which helped to provide the initial framework for this paper. The two following sections lay out the methods we employed to gather and analyse the data, and include our key findings. The paper concludes with an attempt to put our findings in perspective, as well as a reflection on the online research project itself.

## Literature review

In terms of research on disaster-prone areas, especially with a focus on Kumamoto prefecture, tourism is seen as particularly important during the long-term recovery phase, as it contributes to disseminating information to tourists and gaining knowledge regarding natural disaster management (Chan et al. 2019, 1880–1). The findings of the 2018 study conducted by Chan et al. using twelve informants and stakeholders in the tourism sector in Kumamoto prefecture suggest that critical events such as earthquakes bring people in the local community together and therefore strengthen resilience. The study's findings laid the groundwork for our research question to investigate whether this resilience was also applicable in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Tourism in Japan in the time of COVID-19 has already received considerable attention from researchers. Nguyen (2020) looks at the development of Japanese inbound tourism, which exhibited rapid growth prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but declined dramatically as the crisis took hold in early 2020. Natural disasters have a significant negative effect on tourism in Japan both in the short term and during the post-disaster phase and therefore measures need to be taken to mitigate their impact (Nguyen 2020, 1). The same is true for the situations we are witnessing now with COVID-19. According to Nguyen, tourism infrastructure must be improved, information must be made available and safety measures must be prioritised in order to revive tourism (Nguyen 2020, 19–20). Based on Nguyen's findings, we examined and compared answers put forward by local experts and representatives of the tourism sector in Aso.

One such expert is the Aso-based Takayuki Kubo, who has worked extensively on the topic of tourism in Aso and his vision for the region's "post-corona era", in which he offers various suggestions for addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Kubo notes that economic gain is not necessarily the highest priority for local people in Aso, as he believes they place more importance on living a life that is true to themselves and enriches their well-being in the broadest sense. He goes on to share his recommendations for how tourism and thus the economy in Aso could be revitalised. These include rebranding the tourism industry, expanding services to include non-spatially-limited products and services, and increasing experience opportunities (Kubo 2021, 24–7; Kubo 2020, 72–5).

Based on these observations, we decided to investigate the state of the tourism sector during the pandemic and compare it with common natural disasters by conducting a quantitative survey. To further expand on the re-

sults, as well as to dig deeper into Kubo's aforementioned vision for the tourism sector, we decided to conduct qualitative interviews with representatives of the industry in Aso, including an interview with Kubo himself.

## Quantitative results

The main foundation for our research was a study we had previously conducted on the similarities and differences in attitudes and approaches towards dealing with natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic in the tourism sector in the Aso region. In mid 2021 we had carried out a survey via Google Forms, in which 18 representatives from the tourism sector in the Aso region had participated, ranging from representatives of hotels and restaurants to travel agencies. The tourism-and-crisis-themed questionnaire was divided into four sections with a total of 28 questions in Japanese about natural disasters and the pandemic. The majority of the questions were scalar-scored matrix questions, with a few open-ended questions for further elaboration. The survey provided our team with some initial insights into whether the region's tourism industry expertise, with its long-proven and successful track record of handling natural disasters, would be of use in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The answers also helped us gauge the state of the tourism sector during the pandemic.

However, the results clearly showed that the experience and strategies acquired in the aftermath of natural disasters were not viewed as applicable to the industry in reviving tourism, and that the pandemic was seen as significantly more devastating than natural disasters. While respondents strongly felt that natural disasters were better managed in the Aso region than elsewhere in Japan, this confidence was not evident in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic (see fig. 1).

One of the main reasons for this difference was the level of aid and relief provided by the state. While the tourism industry appeared relatively satisfied with governmental aid and support after the Kumamoto earthquakes in 2016, satisfaction was significantly lower in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the pandemic were judged to be much greater than in the case of conventional natural disasters, with respondents noting the unforeseeable length of the pandemic in contrast with the more predictable timeframes of natural disasters. This uncertainty, which was often mentioned in the open-ended questions, and the financial expense involved in adapting to constantly changing conditions clearly contributed to the comparatively pessimistic outlook. Overall, sentiment surrounding the current and future prospects of the tourism industry in the Aso region was

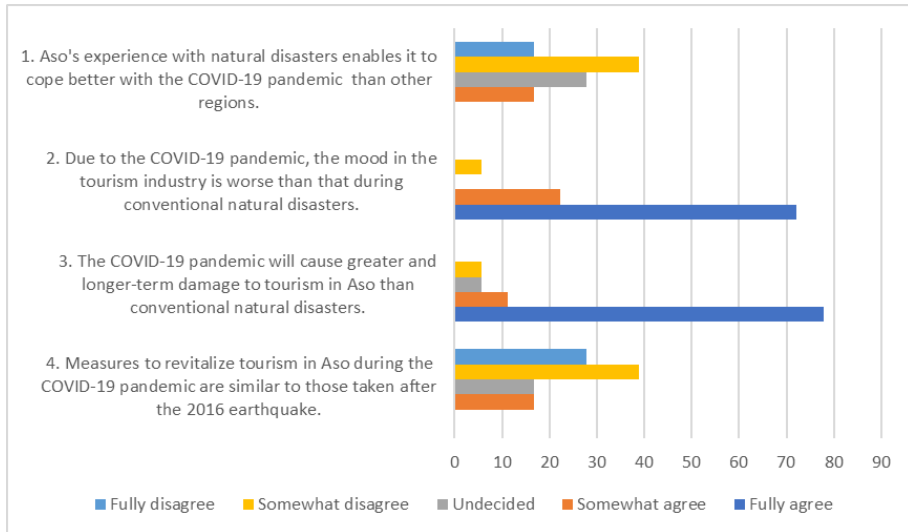


Fig. 1. Differences between natural disasters and COVID-19

considerably more negative following the pandemic than after natural disasters such as the Kumamoto earthquakes in 2016.

In summary, our survey showed that although respondents regarded Aso as better at coping with natural disasters than other regions, this confidence did not extend to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. This negative attitude in the tourism industry appeared to stem from the conviction that the impact of the pandemic would damage tourism in the Aso region more severely than previous natural disasters. Results from the survey show that the tourism industry is unlikely to be able to restore the status quo in the same way as after natural disasters, but instead will have to adjust to a new reality shaped by the uncertainty surrounding the length and impact of the pandemic. To further expand on that notion, our team conducted three interviews with representatives of the tourism industry in the Aso region.

### Qualitative results

These three interviews were carried out by our team during the course of the University of Vienna's Aso Winter Field School in February 2022 and they provided valuable insights for our research topic. First and foremost, an interview with Takayuki Kubo, the head of the Minamiaso Tourism Association, provided information about the inner workings and newly adopted strategies of the tourism industry for countering the effects of the

pandemic. Another interview with a representative of the Aso City Tourism Branch supplied us with reliable data on tourist numbers before and after the pandemic, as well as explanations about the differences between natural disasters and the pandemic. In addition, a highly insightful interview with the operator of a rental bicycle shop in the region provided us with a perspective from one of the stronger “survivors” of the pandemic. Thematical Analysis using the MAXQDA programme was used to code all the interviews. The coding process revealed the following categories: characteristics of tourism, impact of the pandemic, differences between disasters, measures for coping and visions for the post-corona era.

We will begin with an overview of the characteristics of tourism in the Aso region and the impact of the pandemic on tourism. According to data provided by the Aso City Tourism Branch, there was a dramatic decline in tourist numbers from 606,611 people per year in 2019 before the start of the pandemic to 226,450 per year during the pandemic in 2021, a decrease of two thirds in the total number of tourists. Within this, the decline in international tourists was even more marked, dropping from 156,936 in 2019 to a mere 15,031 in 2021, reflecting Japan’s restrictive entry policy for foreign visitors since the start of the pandemic. Consequently, all tourism-related businesses ranging from hotels and restaurants to transport-related operations such as taxis and buses have been hit hard by the pandemic. The impact has even been felt by the region’s culturally important agriculture businesses, due to the greatly reduced demand for food for tourists. However, against this backdrop of decline, one group of tourists maintained relatively high numbers despite the pandemic. These were the local day-trippers, who were mostly making their way to Aso from the neighbouring metropolitan areas of Kumamoto city and Fukuoka city. On this point, all our sources concluded that Aso’s remote and spacious geographical features enabled the region to benefit from sustained tourism by day visitors who frequently returned to the region during the pandemic.

One of our most interesting insights concerned the differences between natural disasters and the pandemic. Given that the Aso region had shown resilience in the face of unforeseen events, one of our guiding questions during our interviews was whether the tourism industry’s crisis-proven track record in the face of various natural disasters would provide confidence for coping with the pandemic. Despite glimpses of fighting spirit in our interviews, overall sentiment appeared much bleaker than in the case of natural disasters. The rental bicycle shop owner compared the effects of the pandemic to those

of an anaphylactic shock and described how after a natural disaster people would come together and link hands in their fight against a clearly visible “enemy”, whereas with COVID-19 the enemy is virtually invisible and the people and tourists themselves are the “problem”. He remarked that “natural disasters are a battle between humans and earthquakes. Pandemics are a battle of people against people” (Interview with rental bicycle shop operator). Another apt comparison was made by Kubo, who concluded that natural disasters affect the “hard” tangible things, e.g., the infrastructure, whereas the pandemic affects the “soft” intangible things, and thus countermeasures are more difficult to implement. His comments are worth quoting in full:

During a pandemic, for example, it’s necessary to ask guests to disinfect, wear a mask and take other pandemic-specific measures. However much effort the hotel makes, you’re usually not going to see good results unless the guests cooperate. So, in that sense, I think measures against the pandemic are more difficult. Preparation for earthquakes and natural disasters is more about the tangible side of things (*hādomen* ハード面) like buildings, whereas pandemics are more about intangible things (*sofutomen* ソフト面), such as being careful about how you communicate with customers. That’s why it’s really difficult—and was really difficult—because it’s not just the management but all the staff who have to work together, and the customers have to be involved too. (Interview with Kubo 2022)

It was also noted that a change in mentality is needed to effectively soften the blow of the pandemic. Aso’s main strength in regard to the pandemic lies in its remote and spacious geographical location. Therefore, the tourism industry in Aso is trying to reinvent itself and steer away from its previous emphasis on mass tourism. Kubo used the term *himitsu ryokō*, literally “secret travel”, to describe this new concept with its focus on experiencing the great outdoors and intimate experiences, such as hotels in the region catering for room service rather than guests eating meals in the hotel restaurants. Kubo’s vision was also shared by the representative of the Aso City Tourism Branch, who foresees a major shift in strategy for the region away from “group tourism” to “individual tourism”, noting that camping provision might become more lucrative in the future. This shift was also recognised by the rental bicycle shop operator, who has succeeded in maintaining his business activities during the pandemic.

In summary, the Aso region has been severely affected by rapidly decreasing tourist numbers since the start of the pandemic, which have nega-

tively impacted numerous businesses in the area. Generally speaking, strategies implemented to deal with natural disasters have not been applicable to the pandemic and knowledge gained from the former does not appear to have translated well to the current situation. Nonetheless, the region is trying to reposition itself as a safe travel destination where people can experience the great outdoors and the intimacy of non-group travel.

### **Concluding remarks**

The tourism sector in the Aso region has been severely affected by the dramatic decline in tourist numbers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic, tourist numbers have fallen to an unprecedented extent, even when compared to previous natural disasters. The representative of the Aso Tourism Association describes the tourism industry as a joy-related industry that fills the area with smiling faces. Naturally, the prolonged absence of such joyful faces has seriously dented sentiment in the sector. The pandemic poses a threat to numerous tourism-related businesses in the Aso region, even threatening agriculture-related industries. This reflects the state of many other regions worldwide (OECD 2020).

Since regional rather than urban tourism may become more attractive to tourists in the face of COVID-19 health concerns, it is likely that spacious and less densely populated areas will become popular tourist destinations during a pandemic (Nguyen 2020, 19). Hence, shifting the focus towards regional tourism could well prove to be a sensible strategy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with such views in the literature regarding measures to counter the effect of the pandemic on tourism in Japan, the Aso region is trying to take innovative steps to reposition itself as a more private, outdoor-oriented and safe travel destination. These were insights we were able to garner from representatives of the tourism sector in Aso, including the Aso City Tourism Branch, the Minamiaso Tourism Association and local business operators.

We were also able to expand and elaborate on preceding research concerning tourism in disaster-prone areas such as Aso (Chan et al. 2019) by contextualising the expertise, knowledge and mindset that had been acquired within the current COVID-19 pandemic. As Chan et al. explains, a good host-guest relationship is vital for creating trust, value and the social capacity to encounter future crises, and this was also a key factor cited by Kubo in relation to the pandemic. We were able to assess that the tourism industry in Aso is highly confident in its handling of natural disasters compared to other re-



gions. However, our quantitative and qualitative results clearly show that the experience acquired from natural disasters has not proved applicable to the current pandemic, which is viewed as a significantly more serious challenge by the sector. The difference was aptly summed up by one respondent who described natural disasters as damaging the “hard”, tangible infrastructure of society, whereas COVID-19 affects the “soft” intangible side of things.

As for the limitations of this paper, it must be stated that our research focused solely on the tourism sector’s perspective on the subject matter. To fully evaluate the possible success of the countermeasures, other variables such as the demographic of the local population with its high proportion of elderly people should also be taken into account. In this regard, our interviews indicated that there was relatively strong opposition against incoming tourists within the elderly local community at the start of the pandemic but that this began to fade as the roll-out of the vaccine progressed throughout the Aso region. A second point to note concerning the limited scope of our research project is that survivorship bias must be taken into account in our qualitative research, as it was mostly business operators and people doing relatively well during the pandemic who were eager to take questions from us.

That said, our research hopes to contribute at least a few ideas and suggestions on how to counteract the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector. The sustainability of disaster-prone destinations is determined by taking a long-term perspective. Material and tangible preparations along with the more intangible relationships and spirit are all important (Jiang / Ritchie 2017). In this study, the Kumamoto tourism stakeholders have embraced all three pillars of sustainability in tourism recovery, e.g., recharging economic momentum after the disaster, the importance of the socio-cultural host-guest relationship and local spirit, and the conservation of landscapes and resources for new opportunities of product development.

## Reflections on the project

As a team fairly new to fieldwork, we were all eager to conduct our research in Japan. The virtual field trip, however, proved not only interesting and exciting, but also informative. We were able to gather an abundance of information regarding our research topic, as shown in the main part of this text. The fact that we were able to work hand in hand with the whole research group and the head of the group, with everyone helping each other out, had a significant impact on our personal motivation and the positive group dynamic. This project was an excellent way to experience fieldwork, whether as a be-

ginner learning the ropes or as a veteran trying out new and innovative approaches.

Because of our specific focus on tourism in the Aso region, our research did not have many points of overlap with the other teams. The main focus of our interviews was the gathering of information, and thus our most important interviews were conducted without the rest of the group. Apart from taking notes, our main responsibility was to ask further questions and go into more detail, which made it easier for us to understand the essence of our respondents' answers when transcribing and analysing them afterwards. After the field trip, our responsibilities changed to analysing and filtering our results; this was carried out mostly in our team, but it also included sharing our insights with the whole group.

The pandemic affected us personally as well as tourism in Japan. It was the reason we had to remain in Austria and were limited to our virtual devices for this trip. Despite this, we were able to achieve significant results. The fact that the modern world is making rapid technological advances and many institutions and individuals can contact each other virtually enabled us to schedule at least one interview per day. Most interviewees had access to a camera or webcam, so we were able to see and interpret non-verbal reactions such as facial expressions during our virtual interviews.

On the other hand, it sometimes proved difficult to “read” the virtual room and we may have missed things that would have been apparent in face-to-face meetings. There were also occasional technical difficulties and we had the additional problem of different time zones when scheduling interviews. Despite these downsides, there is no doubt in our minds that the path we were forced to take during our online field trip worked well and provided us with all the necessary information for our research question.

## References

- Chan, Chung-Shing / Nozu, Kazuo / Cheung, Ting On Lewis. 2019. “Tourism and Natural Disaster Management Process: Perception of Tourism Stakeholders in the Case of the Kumamoto Earthquake in Japan.” *Current Issues in Tourism* 23, no. 15: 1864–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2019.1666809>
- Jiang, Yawei, / Brent, W. Ritchie. 2017. “Disaster Collaboration in Tourism: Motives, Impediments and Success Factors.” *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management* 31: 70–82. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhtm.2016.09.004>.
- Kubo, Takayuki 久保堯之. 2020. “Posutokorona jidai no Aso kankō (tokushū uizukorona posutokorona shakai o kangaeru)” ポストコロナ時代の阿蘇観光 (特集 ウイズコロナ・ポストコロナ社会を考える) [Aso tourism in the post-corona era (Special issue: Thoughts on corona and post-corona society)]. *Kyūshū keizai chōsa geppō* 九州経済調査月報 [Monthly bulletin of Kyushu economic research] 634: 72–5.

- Kubo, Takayuki 久保堯之. 2021 “Kumamoto jishin, korona wazawai o heta Aso no kankō no korekara: Fan-zukuri, shōhin-zukuri, hito-zukuri no shiten kara“ 熊本地震、コロナ禍を経た阿蘇の観光のこれから：ファンづくり、商品づくり、人づくりの視点から [The future of tourism in Aso after the Kumamoto earthquakes and corona disaster: From the perspective of fan development, product development and human resource development]. *Kyūshū keizai chōsa geppō* 九州経済調査月報 [Monthly bulletin of Kyushu economic research] 75, no. 916: 24–7.
- Nguyen, Anh Thi Ngoc. 2020. “Japan’s Inbound Tourism Boom: Lessons for Its Post-COVID-19 Revival.” *International Monetary Fund Working Papers* 20: 1–20.  
<https://doi.org/10.5089/9781513553207.001>
- OECD. 2020. “Rebuilding Tourism for the Future: COVID-19 Policy Responses and Recovery.” OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19). Last modified December 14, 2020.  
<https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/rebuilding-tourism-for-the-future-covid-19-policy-responses-and-recovery-bced9859/>

RABIA DEVECİ

KALOYAN IVANOV

JULIANA NEUNINGER

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

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

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

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

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

## Literature review

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

## Analysis

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

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

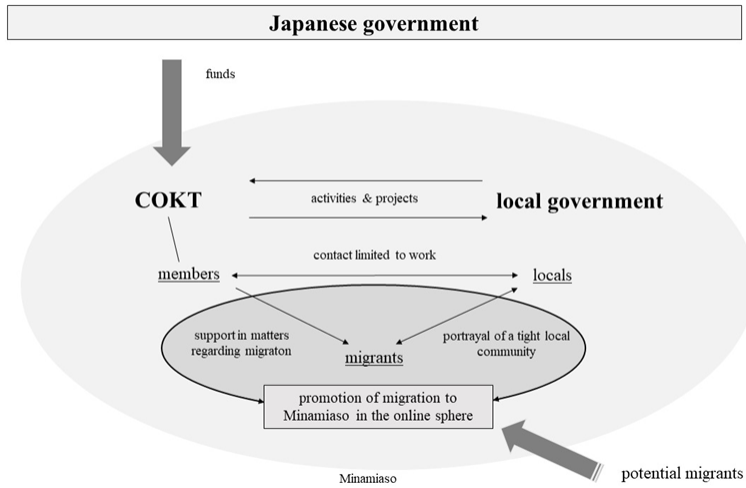


Fig. 1: Actors in the promotion of migration by the COKT in Minamiaso

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

## Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Reflections

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

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

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

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

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

## Bibliography

- Benson, Michaela. 2009. *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Benson, Michaela. 2014. *Understanding Lifestyle Migration: Theoretical Approaches to Migration and the Quest for a Better Way of Life*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Benson, Michaela / O'Reilly, Karen. 2009. “Migration and the Search for a Better Way of Life: A Critical Exploration of Lifestyle Migration.” *The Sociological Review* 57, no. 4: 608–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2009.01864.x>.
- Benson, Michaela / Osbaldiston, Nick. 2016. “Toward a Critical Sociology of Lifestyle Migration: Reconceptualizing Migration and the Search for a Better Way of Life.” *The Sociological Review* 64: 407–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12370>.
- Braun, Virginia / Clarke, Victoria. 2022. *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Feldhoff, Thomas. 2012. “Shrinking Communities in Japan: Community Ownership of Assets as a Development Potential for Rural Japan?” *Urban Design International* 18: 99–109. <https://doi.org/10.1057/udi.2012.26>.
- Ippan shadan hōjin zenkoku kaso chiiki renmei 一般社団法人全国過疎地域連盟. n.d. “Kumamoto-ken” 熊本県 [Kumamoto prefecture]. Accessed 11 June 2022. <https://www.kaso-net.or.jp/publics/index/69/>.
- Ishikawa, Yoshitaka. 2011. “Recent In-Migration to Peripheral Regions of Japan in the Context of Incipient National Population Decline.” In *Imploding Populations in Japan and Germany*, edited by Ralph Lützel / Florian Coulmas, 421–42. Leiden: Brill.
- Klien, Susanne. 2020. *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-growth Society*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Lützel, Ralph / Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian. 2020. „Introduction: Japan's New Ruralities.” In *Japan's New Ruralities: Coping with Decline in the Periphery*, edited by Wolfram Manzenreiter / Ralph Lützel / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 1–12. Abingdon, Oxon: New York, NY: Routledge.
- Matanle, Peter / Rausch, Anthony / The Shrinking Regions Research Group. 2011. *Japan's Shrinking Regions in the 21st Century: Contemporary Responses to Depopulation and Socioeconomic Decline*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.
- Matsumoto, Kunihiko / Shinohara, Naoto / Sawaki, Masanori. 2014. “The Research on the Japanese Governmental Program to Dispatch Urban Young People to Rural Areas in Terms of Stability.” *Proceedings of International Symposium on City Planning 2014*. Accessed 4 July 2022. <http://www.cpij.or.jp/com/iac/sympo/Proceedings2014/40-extended.pdf>.
- Minamiaso-mura 南阿蘇村. 2022a. “Kōhō Minamiaso” 広報みなみあそ [Public information on Minamiaso]. Accessed 16 February 2022. [https://www.vill.minamiaso.lg.jp/kiji0031719/3\\_1719\\_up\\_uqqqlma3.pdf](https://www.vill.minamiaso.lg.jp/kiji0031719/3_1719_up_uqqqlma3.pdf).
- Minamiaso-mura 南阿蘇村. 2022b. “Mura no jinkō oyobi setaizū ni tsuite” 村の人口及び世帯数について [About population and number of households]. Accessed 5 July 2022. [https://www.vill.minamiaso.lg.jp/kiji003739/3\\_739\\_2900\\_up\\_qgu7gc61.pdf](https://www.vill.minamiaso.lg.jp/kiji003739/3_739_2900_up_qgu7gc61.pdf).
- Minamiaso-mura sōmuka 南阿蘇村総務課. 2022. “Minamiasomura ippankaikeiyōsan” 南阿蘇村一般会計予算書 [Minamiaso Village General Account Budget], Accessed 24 June 2022.

<https://www.vill.minamiaso.lg.jp/kiji0031805/index.html>.

Miserka, Antonia. 2018. *Die Anziehungskraft des ländlichen Japans auf alte und neue BewohnerInnen: eine Migrationsanalyse anhand zweier Fallbeispiele in der Region Aso in Kumamoto*. Master's thesis. Accessed 26 January 2022. <https://theses.univie.ac.at/detail/47850#>.

Miserka, Antonia. 2020. "The Role of Internal Migration in Sustaining Rural Communities in Japan: The Case of Aso City in Kumamoto." *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies* 12, no. 1: 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.2478/vj eas-2020-0001>.

Murakami, Kayoko / Oyabu, Takashi. 2016. "An Analysis of How Roadside Stations, 'Michi-no-eki', Function to Promote Local Revitalization: A Case Study in a Rural Area in Japan." *Journal of Global Tourism Research* 1: 47–54. [https://doi.org/10.37020/jgtr.1.1\\_47](https://doi.org/10.37020/jgtr.1.1_47).

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 Lützel / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 230–44. London: Routledge.

Shishido, Yasuyo. 2015. "Chiikiokoshi kyoryokutai jigyo no sekkei oyobi unnyo jokyō" 地域おこし協力隊事業の設計及び運用状況 [The Design and Use of "Chiiki-Okoshi Kyoryokutai" or the Institution of Support Staff for Local Development]. Accessed 6 July 2022. [https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/ncs/15/0/15\\_44/\\_pdf/-char/ja](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/ncs/15/0/15_44/_pdf/-char/ja).

Sōmushō 総務省. 2020. "Kaso taisaku no gaiyō" 過疎対策の概要 [Overview of measures against depopulation]. Accessed 11 June 2022. [https://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_content/000694962.pdf](https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000694962.pdf).

Sōmushō 総務省. 2022a. "Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai" 地域おこし協力隊 [Local revitalisation group]. Accessed 28 October 2021. [https://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_sosiki/jichi\\_gyousei/c-gyousei/02gyosei08\\_03000066.html](https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/jichi_gyousei/c-gyousei/02gyosei08_03000066.html).

Sōmushō 総務省. 2022b. "Chiikichikara sōzō gurūpu shisaku ni tsuite" 地域力創造グループ施策について [About the policy for regional power creation groups]. Accessed 4 July 2022. [https://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_content/000744097.pdf](https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000744097.pdf).

Takahashi, Yasuo / Kubota, Hiroyuki / Shigeto, Sawako / Yoshida, Takahiro / Yamagata, Yoshiki. 2021. "Diverse Values of Urban-to-Rural Migration: A Case Study of Hokuto City, Japan." *Journal of Rural Studies* 87: 292–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2021.09.013>.

Tanigaki, Masayuki 谷垣雅之. 2018. "Sakumetsu kanōsei jichiitai e no ijūsha geikon ni kan suru teiryō bunsetsu" 消滅可能性自治体への移住者誘因に関する定量分析 (A Quantitative Analysis of Factors Affecting Migration to Disappearing Local Municipalities in Japan). *Nōson keikakugaku kaishi* 農村計画学会誌 [Journal of Rural Planning] 36, no. 4: 554–61.

Teijū Sokushinka 定住促進課. n.d. "Minamiaso de mainichi o asobō" 南阿蘇で毎日を遊ぼう [Enjoying every day in Minamiaso]. Accessed on 5 July 2022. <https://minamiasoijyuu.jp/>.

Obikwelu, Faith / Ikegami, Koichi / Tsuruta, Tadasu. 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.

## Appendix

No.	Link	Uploaded
1	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1xMxA9iWfQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1xMxA9iWfQ</a>	12 March 2018
2	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ITeml-QNic">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ITeml-QNic</a>	01 May 2018
3	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH8MHMVHRs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cH8MHMVHRs</a>	28 May 2019
4	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfRT6GbcidE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfRT6GbcidE</a>	10 October 2019
5	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqvSN6JRxIE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqvSN6JRxIE</a>	14 February 2020
6	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnxKiuPU_KI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnxKiuPU_KI</a>	4 March 2020
7	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV1S1A1G5xuo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YV1S1A1G5xuo</a>	28 October 2020

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

(last accessed 8 July 2022)

Table 1: Overview of analysed YouTube videos

## **PART 3**

**Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization  
in Japan: Involving PhD students in research at  
Freie Universität Berlin**





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; Lützelner 2018; Manzenreiter / Lützelner / 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 re-posting 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.<sup>1</sup> 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-

<sup>1</sup> 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.

## References

- Arita-chō 有田町. 2022. “Chōnai no kansen-sha hassei jōkyō” 町内の感染者発生状況 [Outbreak of infections in the town]. Accessed July 15, 2022. <https://www.town.arita.lg.jp/main/8495.html>.
- Baumann, Christoph. 2018. *Idyllische Ländlichkeit: Eine Kulturgeographie der Ländlichkeit*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Benson, Michaela / O'Reilly, Karen eds. 2009. *Lifestyle Migration: Expectations, Aspirations and Experiences*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Brown, David L. / Glasgow, Nina / Kulcsar, Laszlo J. / Bolender, Benjamin C. / Arguillas, Marrie-Joy. 2008. *Rural Retirement Migration*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Bu, Hyejin. 2017. “Urban-rural Migrants and Commodification of Rural-coastal Villages on a Touristic Island: A Case Study of Woljeong-Ri on Jeju Island, Korea.” *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 6, no. 1: 19–33.
- Costello, Lauren. 2009. “Urban–rural Migration: Housing Availability and Affordability.” *Australian Geographer* 40, no. 2: 219–233.
- Furusato Kaiki Shien Sentā ふるさと回帰支援センター. 2022. “2021-nen ijū kibō chiiki rankingu kōkai” 2021年移住希望地域ランキング公開 [Publication of the ranking of regions to which people wish to relocate for the year 2021]. Accessed May 1, 2022. [https://www.furusatokaiki.net/topics/ranking\\_2021/](https://www.furusatokaiki.net/topics/ranking_2021/).
- Hashimoto, Kōshi 橋本行史. (2015). *Chihō sōsei no riron to jissen 地方創生の理論と実践* [Theory and practice of regional revitalisation]. Tōkyō: Sōsei-sha 創成社.
- Hatayama, Naoko 畑山直子. 2015. “‘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 gakkai nenpō* 日本都市学会年報 [Annual Report of the Urban Society Japan] 49: 137–145.
- Kitano, Shu. 2009. *Space, Planning and Rurality: Uneven Rural Development in Japan*. Victoria, BC: Trafford.
- Klien, Susanne. 2016. “Reinventing Ishinomaki, Reinventing Japan? Creative Networks, Alternative Lifestyles and the Search for Quality of Life in Post-growth Japan.” *Japanese Studies* 36, no. 1: 39–60.
- 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*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Koyanagi, Shinji 小柳真二. 2016. “Chihōbu ni okeru ijū-teijū sokushinsaku no haikei – genjō – kadai: Kyūshū chihō no jirei” 地方部における移住・定住促進策の背景・現状・課題 — 九州地方の事例 — [Promoting in-migration and resettlement in peripheral regions of Japan – its background, conditions, and challenges: Case study of the Kyūshū region]. *Chigaku Zasshi* 地学雑誌 [Journal of Geography] 125, no. 4: 507–522.
- Kozinets, Robert V. 2020. *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*. London: Sage.
- Liscutin, Nicola. 2011. “Indignez-Vous! ‘Fukushima,’ New Media and Anti-Nuclear Activism in Japan.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 47, 1.
- Lützel, Ralph. 2018. “Introduction: Rural Areas – Dying or just Smelling Funny?” In *Rural Areas between Decline and Resurgence: Lessons from Japan and Austria*, edited by Ralph Lützel, 15–25. Wien: Institut für Ostasienwissenschaften/Japanologie.
- Manzenreiter, Wolfram / Lützel, Ralph / Polak-Rottmann, Sebastian eds. 2020. *Japan’s New Ruralities: Coping with Decline in the Periphery*. London: Routledge.



- Masuda, Hiroya 増田博也 ed. 2014. *Chihō shōmetsu: Tōkyō ikkyoku shūchū ga maneku jinkō kyūgen* 地方消滅—東京一極集中が招く人口急減 [The disappearance of the regions: The rapid population decline brought on by mono-polar concentration in Tōkyō]. Tōkyō: Chūōkōron shinsha 中央公論新社.
- Miserka, Antonia. 2019. “Ländliche Regionen im Wandel: Eine quantitative Vergleichsstudie zur Rolle der Binnenmigration für die Erhaltung ländlicher Siedlungen“, In *Japan 2019: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, edited by David Chiavacci / Iris Wiczorek, 78–102. München: Iudicium.
- MLIT (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism) 国土交通省. 2018. “Heisei 29-nendo kokudo kōtsū hakusho (gaiyō)” 平成29年度国土交通白書(概要) [Whitebook on land and transport]. Accessed August 20, 2018. <http://www.mlit.go.jp/common/001239760.pdf>.
- Motohashi, Atsuko / Matsuoka, Daichi. 2020. “More People Moving to Rural Areas across Japan as New Lifestyles Emerge Due to Virus.” *The Mainichi*. Accessed May 14, 2021. <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200612/p2a/00m/0fe/016000c?fbcl>.
- Nakagawa, Yoshinori. 2018. “Psychological and Behavioral Predictors of Rural In-migration.” *Rural Sociology* 83, no. 1: 24–50.
- Obikwelu, Faith E. / Ikegami, Koichi / Tsuruta, Tadasu. 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: 70–82.
- Odagiri, Tokumi 小田切徳美. 2015. “Tayō na wakamono to tayō na nōsangyoson 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 *Chiiki okoshi 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 Shiikawa Shinobu 椎川忍 / Odagiri Tokumi 小田切徳美 / Hirai Tarō 平井太郎, 23–37. Tōkyō: Gakugei shuppan 学芸出版.
- O’Day, Robin. 2015. “Differentiating SEALDs from Freeters and Precariats: The Politics of Youth Movements in Contemporary Japan.” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 13, no. 37, 2.
- Ōno, Akira 大野晃. 2008. *Genkai shūraku to chiiki saisei* 限界集落と地域再生 [Marginal villages and rural revitalisation]. Shizuoka: Shizuoka Shinbunsha 静岡新聞社.
- Przybylski, Liz. 2021. *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline and In Between*. London: Sage.
- Rausch, Anthony. 2008. “Japanese Rural Revitalisation: The Reality and Potential of Cultural Commodities as Local Brands.” *Japanstudien* 20: 223–245.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2010. “Selling Tradition in Japanese Rural Tourism.” *Orientwissenschaftliche Hefte* 28: 121–151.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2012. “Food Pedagogies in Japan: From the Implementation of the Basic Law on Food Education to Fukushima.” *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 52, no. 3: 507–531.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2014. *Lokale Identität und ländliche Revitalisierung: Die japanische Keramikstadt Arita und die Grenzen der Globalisierung*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2016. “Lay People and Experts in Citizen Science: Monitoring Radioactively Contaminated Food in Post-Fukushima Japan.” *ASIEN* 140: 56–73.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2017. “Food Safety and Consumer Trust in Post-Fukushima Japan.” *Japan Forum* 29, no. 1: 53–76.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2018. “Japanese Foodscapes in Berlin: Teaching Research Methods through Food.” *ASIEN* 149: 111–124.
- 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 Lützel / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 230–244. London: Routledge.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2022. “Zieht aufs Land! Strategien japanischer Präfektoren zur Anwerbung von Stadt-Land-Migrant\*innen während der Corona-Pandemie.“ In *Japan 2022: Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, edited by David Chiavacci / Iris Wiczorek, 254–275. München: Iudicium.
- Rosenberger, Nancy. 2017. “Young Organic Farmers in Japan: Betting on Lifestyle, Locality, and Livelihood.” *Contemporary Japan* 29, no. 1: 14–30.



- Saga Shinbun 佐賀新聞. 2020. "Sōzō ijō no ureyuki: Web Arita tōki ichi heimaku" 「想像以上の売れ行き」Web有田陶器市閉幕 [Web Arita Porcelain Market closed with sales exceeding expectations]. May 5, 2020. <https://www.saga-s.co.jp/articles/-/519866>.
- Sakuma, Nobuo 佐久間 信夫 / Inoue, Yoshihiro 井上 善博 / Itō, Tadaharu 伊藤 忠治. 2017. *Chihō sōsei no bijon to senryaku* 地方創生のビジョンと戦略 [Visions and strategies for regional revitalisation]. Tōkyō: Soseisha 創成社.
- Slater, David H. / Nishimura, Keiko / Kindstrand, Love. 2012. "Social Media, Information, and Political Activism in Japan's 3.11 Crisis." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10, no. 24, 1.
- Stockdale, Aileen / Philip, Lorna J. / MacLeod, Marcell. 2013. "Retirement Transition Migration: Implications for Rural Development." *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 8, no. 3: 303–320.
- Tanahashi, Satsuki 棚橋咲月. 2020. "Korona de mitsume naosu tokaigurashi no kachi" コロナで見つめ直す都会暮らしの価値 [The value of urban living revisited during Corona]. *Asahi Shinbun Digital*. Accessed December 14, 2020. <https://www.asahi.com/articles/ASN6D5WZKN69TIPE006.html>.
- Taketa-shi 竹田市. 2022. "Taketa-shinai no kansen-sha hassei jōkyō" 竹田市内の感染者発生状況 [Outbreak of infections in Taketa]. Accessed July 15, 2022. <https://www.city.taketa.oita.jp/COVID/kanjya/index.html>.
- Yamanō, Hiroshi 山納洋. 2018. *Chiiki purodyūsu, hajime no ippo* 地域プロデュース、はじめの一步 [Producing the region, the first step]. Tōkyō: Kawade shobō 河出書房.

TU THANH NGO

## **Overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons learned from joining a group project in times of turbulence**

My time working on a policy-oriented sub-project within an inter-disciplinary group project in the time of COVID-19, both as a research assistant and a PhD student, has been a journey full of learning opportunities. As part of Cornelia Reiher's research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan", my sub-project seeks to explicate how Japanese core policy actors envision, formulate, implement and assess rural revitalisation policies from a comparative perspective. With this focus on the political and policy aspects of rural revitalisation, I aim to complement the anthropological focus pursued by other group members who are concentrating more on the beneficiaries of revitalisation policies, e.g., migrants and local residents. For this qualitative and inter-disciplinary group project, all members originally planned to conduct fieldwork in Japan together, sharing data, collaborating closely and learning from each other's expertise. Because this is the first academic and professional project that I have taken part in, I was—and still am—very excited to have the opportunity to contribute to the project and learn from this work experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to our project. It affected our research plans and also lengthened the time it took me to adapt to my new working life in Berlin. Nevertheless, the pandemic also forced us to be flexible in adjusting to an ever-changing situation, which resulted in some unexpected outcomes. Against this backdrop, I would like to share some of the experiences, challenges and lessons learned during my time as a research assistant on the project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan" while trying to finish my own PhD thesis.

### **Introducing my research project**

Out-migration of young people from rural areas to urban centres has been one of the main problems in rural Japan for several decades (Hagihara 1984; Watanabe 2001, 158; Izuta et al. 2016; Okubo et al. 2016; Shiikawa et al. 2019; Hashimoto et al. 2020; Ishikawa 2020). In 2018, the Tōkyō area received ap-

prox. 490,000 people from other parts of the country, more than half of whom were young people (Kumagai 2020, 233). Since large-scale out-migration erodes the social and economic vitality of rural communities (Feldhoff 2013; Wijaya 2013; Takamura et al. 2017; Matsuoka 2018; Ishikawa 2020), policies to attract urban migrants to rural areas have been increasing in importance (Golding / Curtis 2013).

Currently, the Comprehensive Strategy for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalising Local Economy in Japan (*Machi, hito, shigoto, sōsei sōgō senryaku*, hereafter referred to as the Comprehensive Strategy) is the most prominent of these policies and the only comprehensive framework for rural revitalisation. The framework was adopted in 2014 by Shinzo Abe and has been in effect since 2015. The goal of the Comprehensive Strategy is to consolidate all policies and schemes for rural revitalisation under a single holistic framework by eliminating the vertical hierarchy of ministries (Yoshizawa 2019). In addition to the national plans, there are also prefectural and municipal versions of the Comprehensive Strategy that outline four main goals for rural revitalisation, one of which is to “build connections with regions and create a flow of people to regions” (Japanese Government, Cabinet Office 2020). A leading programme that falls under this goal is the Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (COKT), which was initiated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) in 2009. Its main goals are to attract and maintain COKT participants in rural areas in order for these participants to carry out revitalisation activities in their host communities. Like other policies, the COKT initially began as a separate programme but is now part of the Comprehensive Strategy.

My project focuses on the Comprehensive Strategy and the COKT for four reasons. First, the Comprehensive Strategy and the COKT serve as a case study for investigating the Japanese central government’s policies for rural revitalisation, along with their underlying concepts and objectives. While often considered a flagship policy framework by Abe, it was initially unclear at the beginning of our project how the Comprehensive Strategy differed substantively from previous revitalisation policies, and if or how schemes such as the COKT might have changed after being incorporated into the Comprehensive Strategy. At the current time of writing, my preliminary findings show that the creation of the Comprehensive Strategy may have been driven by political motives. Some national respondents contended that politicians were pandering to the public and covering up bad political practices (e.g., pork-barrel politics) by formulating “new” revitalisation policies that did not significantly differ from previous ones apart from minor modifications. They pointed

out that new administrations and prime ministers often rebrand pre-existing strategies in their own “policy colours” to create their own flagship policies.

Second, I aim to explore Japan’s urban-rural relations by focusing on the Comprehensive Strategy and the COKT. While the Comprehensive Strategy was initially formulated by the central government, it was then revised and adapted to local contexts by prefectural and municipal governments. While some scholars have demonstrated that the local versions of the Comprehensive Strategy differ across municipalities (Nakamura 2015; Hayashi 2015; Kawabata et al. 2017), there is still a dearth of studies explaining how the municipal plans differ from the national and/or prefectural versions, and each other. Furthermore, it is unclear what roles the national, prefectural and municipal governments play in facilitating the Comprehensive Strategy and COKT.

Third, my research will contribute to the scholarship on rural policy actors. Existing studies on Japan’s rural development policy tend to analyse rural revitalisation policies from the perspective of municipal non-state actors, such as local residents, migrants, businesses and NGOs (Matsuoka 2018; Ochi 2019; Maruyama 2005; Obikwelu 2018). That said, scholars have shown that in addition to key actors such as politicians and bureaucrats, other proximate actors such as government advisors, lobbyists and policy secretaries are also likely to be able to influence policies (Page 2010; Howlett 2011; Gunn 2017; Ōkubo 2013; Craft / Howlett 2013; Marier 2008; Nekola / Kohoutek 2017). Thus, it is important to understand the beliefs and ideas that policy actors have in relation to a policy problem and also the policy tools they have to tackle the problem (Howlett / Mukherjee 2019; Gunn 2017). Nevertheless, despite their important role in formulating and implementing revitalisation policies, the literature has not explored the views of Japan’s national policy actors regarding rural revitalisation policies to the same extent as local actors. Thus, my research seeks to redress this balance by investigating the roles and visions of different groups of rural policy actors (politicians, bureaucrats, advisors, academics and NGO/NPO staff) at the three levels of government and across different localities.

Fourth, my research aims to contribute to the evaluation of rural revitalisation policies in Japan, and more specifically that of the COKT. Scholars note that appraisals of the COKT tend to focus on the scheme’s numerical outputs, e.g., the number of participants and rates of settlement (Zushi 2013; Hirai / Soga 2017; Shibazaki / Nakatsuka 2017) and while some such evaluations of the COKT suggest that the scheme has been successful (Zushi 2013; Hirai / Soga 2017; Shibazaki / Nakatsuka 2017), Taguchi argues that revitali-

sation activities should be viewed in terms of quality, rather than quantity or numerical outputs (2018, 10). Other scholars agree that quantity-based evaluation practices are inadequate for explaining unintended effects, stakeholders' perceptions and causal mechanisms, e.g., the factors that determine the actual success of a policy (Chen / Rossi 1989; Chen 1990, 1994, 2012, 2015; Yamaya 2002; Head 2008; Vedung 2012; Zushi 2013; Hayashi 2015; Kotakemori 2016; Sasakawa 2017; Kawabata et al. 2017; Hirai / Soga 2017). There have been some attempts to assess the COKT beyond its numerical outputs. For instance, scholars discuss the importance of having financial support and charismatic leaders (Reiher 2020), the concern that COKT participants are considered little more than servants, and municipal governments not knowing what they should ask participants to do (Zushi 2013; Taguchi 2018). However, these attempts are often single case studies on the municipal level and do not explore the perspectives of national and prefectural actors. My research seeks to address this problem by evaluating the COKT comparatively, focusing on policy actors in Tōkyō (national level), Fukuoka and Nagasaki Prefectures (prefectural level) and Buzen City and Hasami Town (municipal level).

### **Conducting an academic group project during COVID-19**

COVID-19 has disrupted everyday life throughout the world and our research project has been no exception. As with group activities in any other field, I believe being part of an academic research team requires one to be “social”, that is, to effectively collaborate with other members. Such effective collaboration takes time to develop, as members need to get to know each other's personalities and working styles and build mutual trust. Our project started on 1 October 2020, only two weeks before Berlin entered its second lockdown, which would last for seven months. Despite being able to schedule some in-person meetings during that short two-week period, we had to communicate remotely for most of our first year. This sudden move to complete e-communication lengthened my learning curve and adaptation process, as it became more difficult to understand each other when expressions and nuances got lost in emails and social cues were obscured behind computer screens. The severity of the winter lockdown made me feel particularly isolated as I had just moved to Berlin for the first time after finishing my MA in Austria and Hungary. The combination of moving to a new country, initial paperwork, a new work environment and the lockdown was indeed challenging. Thus, on the social aspect front, the pandemic has had a significant impact on me personally and also on our team as a whole.

COVID-19 also influenced the academic and professional aspects of our project throughout the first half of our collaboration. One issue was that online communication made it more difficult for me to navigate the academic system in Germany. The German system of research assistantships and doctoral studies differs from the structured PhD programmes prevalent in the US and Japan with which I am familiar. Hence, I was at times confused about my twin roles as a research assistant for our group project and as a PhD student affiliated with the Graduate School of East Asian Studies. Furthermore, as our project follows a qualitative approach, we were supposed to conduct fieldwork in Japan, make contacts and interview research participants in the field. However, I could only enter Japan for my fieldwork in May 2022, almost two years into my project. Needless to say, the situation was highly precarious and challenging for qualitative researchers, including PhD students with limited funding and time. As explained in the introduction, my intended research participants were policy actors, including government officials and politicians. When embarking on my research, I had been concerned that it might be difficult to obtain access to relevant policy actors without knowing their key gatekeepers, and so the prospect of contacting politicians and ministry officials online appeared extremely daunting. For this reason, COVID-19 significantly impacted my mental wellbeing and also the general mood of our team, since we could not be sure when we would be able to conduct our fieldwork and collect the necessary data.

### **Being flexible during the pandemic**

In light of the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, flexibility and adaptability became the mantras for our team. First, my supervisor tried to create some opportunities to improve both our academic development and our social well-being. To prepare us for our research, she asked us to participate in an online research design course in 2020, and she also suggested that I join her MA methods course on interviewing skills during the summer of 2021. As we entered our second year and the lockdown in Berlin was lifted, our team was able to reunite in person and participate in teambuilding activities such as going on field trips, eating out and a digital Christmas party. My supervisor's efforts to create a sense of normality during these unusual times, together with her discipline and determination to carry on with the project, helped to keep me on track and optimistic about my PhD research.

Second, being part of a team has made my research life much more dynamic. It is a great asset to have a research team with whom I can consult

and discuss a vast array of topics, ranging from preliminary findings, interview questions and methods to life plans and philosophy. I find it extremely helpful to have an academic and emotional support system right by my side. Furthermore, our almost-exclusively online meetings in the beginning stages of our teamwork familiarised me with the virtual environment, which would later be crucial for my online interviews with research participants. I have also discovered from my interviews with Japanese policy actors that the ability to work remotely with others is now considered a transferable and important skill even in the post-COVID world.

Since autumn 2021 our online group meetings have transformed into a larger study group to which we invite researchers on rural Japan from around the world to join us every month. In this study group, we present our findings, discuss methodologies and exchange ideas. Other policy-oriented researchers who have joined this group have given me valuable insights. My colleague and I take turns in organising and chairing these study group sessions and we have also presented to the group.

Our team also operates a research blog and receives contributions from academics and practitioners in different languages. For my part, in addition to contributing blog posts, I reach out to practitioners in Japan to ask for their cooperation. My interlocutors have made contributions about rural revitalisation in Japanese and Vietnamese; their posts are then translated into English and published on our blog. This active research blog has proven to be an effective “gatekeeper” in its own right, as it provides me with a credible profile when reaching out to policy actors. Many of my respondents have mentioned that they looked at our blog before our interviews. In addition, our project has been able to connect with a research group on rural Japan from Kyūshū University and has since held several joint virtual meetings. The discussions with researchers from Kyūshū University have enabled me to step out of the “international researchers’ bubble” and provided me with an insight into the perspectives of Japanese researchers.

My supervisor also got us involved in writing joint articles and encouraged me to create policy briefs about different rural revitalisation programmes to share with group members. Having been trained in policy analysis during my MA, I have enjoyed applying my policy analysis skills to a real project beyond coursework. All these different activities and advantages would not have been possible if I had chosen an independent PhD programme rather than joining a group project.



Third, the move to digital research due to COVID-19 has resulted in some unexpectedly positive outcomes for our project. While waiting for Japan to reopen, my supervisor suggested that I analyse written policy documents and, more specifically, different versions of the Comprehensive Strategy across three levels of government and localities. As mentioned earlier, one of my project's goals is to investigate the underlying concepts and objectives of Japan's rural revitalisation policies. Originally, I intended to rely solely on interviews to explore this aspect. However, I learned of two qualitative methods, namely "policy content analysis" (Hall / Steiner 2020) and "policy prioritization research" (Gugushvili / Salukvadze 2021), which I was able to use to analyse objectives, intervention logic and priorities. Later, I asked my research participants to comment on my analysis of the plans. For instance, my preliminary findings from analysing versions of the Comprehensive Strategy showed that the national version has a strong focus on economic and financial measures. At the same time, one of my respondents, a director of what had been the Headquarters for Rural Revitalisation (*chihōsōsei honbu*) in charge of drafting the Comprehensive Strategy, commented that his approach to rural revitalisation was heavily influenced by economics. In this way, my analysis of the written policy documents became another relevant source of data that helped increase the validity of my research. Furthermore, my supervisor's suggestion to analyse the documents gave me a concrete and achievable target to accomplish at a time of great uncertainty, and this work later came to form the first analytical chapter of my thesis. My summaries of the policy documents have also been used as part of a joint paper on support schemes for migrants to Kyūshū.

I also found that I was able to gain access and conduct interviews with some key policy actors via e-communication in a rather more straightforward manner than I had expected. In order to conduct interviews while in Berlin, I tried various ways of reaching out to potential research participants. For instance, I sent introductory emails to the relevant ministerial, prefectural and municipal offices and also directly contacted the division in charge of the COKT at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. Most importantly, social media proved to be highly effective as I was able to contact several government advisors and high-ranking bureaucrats via platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. The fact that I was carrying out "fieldwork with participants in Japan" while still based in Berlin meant that I was usually able to consult with my supervisor and colleagues directly after the interviews. Solutions for problems encountered during the interviews, along



with new insights and inspiration often emerged as a result of such consultations. These initial online meetings and connections also provided me with a solid base when I was finally able to travel to Japan in May 2022. The research participants I had interviewed online immediately agreed to meet in person and introduced me to other key policy actors across my field sites. Fortunately, I have been able to interview some key policy actors, including high-ranking government officials and politicians, who are highly relevant for our project. After the interviews, I usually share data with other team members, including interview summaries, transcripts and audios.

Finally, joining a group project has given me ample opportunities to grow as an individual. Working closely with an international team for three years has constantly forced me to continue learning to keep up with work demands and to continue improving my interpersonal skills to collaborate with colleagues. It has also helped me to develop stress-relieving strategies to stay balanced and motivated, and I have learnt to be more flexible and adaptable. Of course, there are obstacles to overcome in all group settings, even more so in the time of COVID-19. However, I believe that all the lessons from these turbulent times have helped me grow both as a young researcher and as a young person.

## Summary and conclusion

The time working as a member of the group project “Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan” while conducting my own PhD research has so far been a journey full of growth opportunities. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on our group project and my sub-project; it completely changed our research plan and cast doubt on our ability to conduct fieldwork and interviews in Japan. All these challenges, together with lengthy lockdowns and social distancing, created significant stress for young researchers, myself included. However, the negative influence of COVID-19 was mitigated thanks to my research team. My supervisor’s efforts to regularly bring the whole team together, albeit online, kept me motivated, and the group activities we were able to carry out in the face of precarity provided a sense of normality and stability. Moreover, by belonging to a group project I was able to receive instantaneous advice and consultations on a variety of topics, along with numerous opportunities to develop soft and interpersonal skills as well as research techniques.

The skills and advice I received from my colleagues have enabled me to conduct some fascinating and insightful interviews with policy actors

that have enabled me to discover what they think about Japan's revitalisation policies. For instance, I have found that some policy actors differentiate between the various Japanese terms for rural revitalisation, such as *chiiki kasseika*, *chiiki-zukuri* and *chihōsōsei*. They shared with me that *chiiki kasseika* still evokes a negative image of the so-called "pork-barrel politics" prevalent during Japan's high-growth era, when the government overinvested in infrastructure, transportation, and public works in exchange for votes. By contrast, *chihōsōsei* usually refers to the comprehensive policy framework initiated by Shinzo Abe in 2014 and tends to have a more positive connotation of developing regions from within, an approach that resembles Wirth et al.'s (2016) "endogenous development theory". I have also been able to test a hypothesis that our team came up with before my fieldwork that the central government may be unaware of some of the activities conducted in the field. For instance, an official at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications shared with me that the ministry's main role is to finance the COKT programme and that she is in the dark about its efficacy and how it is being implemented by the municipalities. I believe I was able to obtain such insights thanks to consultations with my colleagues, who advised me on whom to interview, what questions to ask and what aspects to focus on.

At the time of writing, I have only three more months left for fieldwork in Japan and one year until my expected graduation. Although the year ahead will be extremely hectic, I am confident that it will also be highly fulfilling due to the academic and emotional support from my colleagues. I very much look forward to contributing more data to our project and finishing my PhD as planned.

## References

- Chen, Huey T. 1990. *Theory-Driven Evaluations*. Newbury Park / London / New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Chen, Huey T. 1994. "Theory-Driven Evaluations: Need, Difficulties, and Options." *Evaluation Practice* 15, no.1: 79–82.
- Chen, Huey T. 2012. "Theory-Driven Evaluation: Conceptual Framework, Application and Advancement." In *Evaluation von Programmen und Projekten für eine demokratische Kultur*, edited by Rainer Strobl / Olaf Lobermeier / Wilhelm Heitmeyer, 17–40. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Chen, Huey T. 2015. *Practical Program Evaluation: Theory-Driven Evaluation and the Integrated Evaluation Perspective*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles / Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Chen, Huey T. / Rossi, Peter H. 1989. "Issues in the Theory-Driven Perspective." *Evaluation and Program Planning* 12: 299–306.
- Craft, Jonathan / Howlett, Michael. 2013. "The Dual Dynamics of Policy Advisory Systems: The Impact of Externalization and Politicization on Policy Advice." *Policy and Society* 32 (2013): 187–97.

- Feldhoff, Thomas. 2013. "Shrinking Communities in Japan: Community Ownership of Assets as a Development Potential for Rural Japan?" *Urban Design International* 18, no. 1: 99-109.
- Golding, Shaun A. / Curtis, Katrine J. 2013. "Migration and Rural Development: Resettlement, Remittances, and Amenities." In *Handbook of Rural Development*, edited by Gerry Paul Green, 92-114. Massachusetts, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.
- Gugushvili, Temur / Salukvadze, Gvantsa. 2021. "Using MAXQDA for Analyzing Documents: An Example of Prioritization Research Design in Urban Development." In *The Practice of Qualitative Data Analysis: Research Examples Using MAXQDA*, 1st ed., edited by Michael C. Gizzi / Stefan Rädiker, 107-20. Berlin: MAXQDA Press.
- Gunn, Andrew. 2017. "Policy Entrepreneurs and Policy Formulation." In *Handbook of Policy Formulation*, edited by Michael Howlett / Simon Fraser / Ishani Mukherjee, 265-82. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Hagihara, Kiyoko 萩原清子. 1984. "Kasomondai no keizai gakuteki kōsatsu" 過疎問題の経済学的考察 [An Economic Study of the Depopulation Problem]. *Studies in Regional Science* 15: 185-211.
- Hall, Damon M. / Steiner, Rebecca. 2020. "Policy Content Analysis: Qualitative Method for Analyzing Sub-National Insect Pollinator Legislation." *MethodsX* 7 (2020): 1-7.
- Hashimoto, Atsuko / Telfer, David J. / Telfer, Sakura. 2020. "Life beyond Growth? Rural Depopulation Becoming the Attraction in Nagoro, Japan's Scarecrow Village." *Journal of Heritage Tourism* XX, 1-20.
- Hayashi, Kenichi 林健一. 2015. "Chihō jichitai ni okeru jūyō gyōseki hyōka shihyō no katsuyō jōkyō ni tsuite: jakkan no 'machi, hito, shigoto sōsei sōgō senryaku' o jirei toshite" 地方自治体における重要業績評価指標の活用状況について - 若干の「まち・ひと・しごと創生総合戦略」を事例として [About Utilization of the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) in Local Governments: Some Cases of "Regional Population Vision and Regional Comprehensive Strategy"]. *Chūō gakuin daigaku shakai shisutemu kenkyūjo kiyō* 中央学院大学社会システム研究所紀要 [Bulletin of the Social System Research Institute Chuo Gakuin University] 16, no. 1: 30-46.
- Head, Brian. 2008. "Wicked Problems in Public Policy." *Public Policy* 3, no. 2: 101-18.
- Hirai, Tarō 平井太郎 / Tōru Soga 曾我亨. 2017. "Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai no iriguchi, deguchi senryaku" 地域おこし協力隊の入口・出口戦略全国版 [General Survey of "Community Co-builders" in Contemporary Japan]. *Jinbun shakai kagaku ronshō* 人文社会科学論叢 [Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences] 3: 121-39.
- Howlett, Michael. 2011. "Revisiting Policy Design: The Rise and Fall (and Rebirth?) of Policy Design Studies." Conference paper for the General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) Section 63. <http://ecpr.eu/filestore/paperproposal/777bba9e-7de8-423d-9c1d-1c4362c0e92a.pdf>.
- Howlett, Michael / Mukherjee, Ishani. 2017. "Policy Formulation: Where Knowledge Meets Power in the Policy Process." In *Handbook of Policy Formulation*, edited by Michael Howlett / Simon Fraser / Ishani Mukherjee, 3-22. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Ishikawa, Yoshitaka. 2020. "Internal Migration in Japan." In *Internal Migration in the Countries of Asia: A Cross-National Comparison*, edited by Martin Bell / Aude Bernard / Elin Charles-Edwards / Yu Zhu, 113-36. Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
- Izuta, Giido 伊豆田義人 / Nakagawa, Megumi 中川恵 / Nishikawa, Tomoko 西川友子 / Satō, Yuka 佐藤佑香. 2016. "Toshibu e no ijū ni kiin suru chiikikasaka to wakamono no kachikan to no kankei no moderu ni tsuite" 都市部への移住に起因する地域過疎化と若者の価値観との関係のモデルについて [Modeling the Relationship between Young People's Values and the Depopulation Phenomenon in Rural Areas Due to Migration to Cities]. *Yamagata kenritsu Yonezawa joshi tankidaigaku kiyō* 山形県立米沢女子短期大学紀要 [Bulletin of Yonezawa Women's Junior College] 52: 65-78.
- Japanese Government, Cabinet Office, Japan. 2020. "Dai 2 ki 'Machi, hito, shigoto' sōsei sōgō senryaku" 第2期「まち・ひと・しごと創生総合戦略」. Japanese Government, Cabinet Office, Japan. <https://www.chisou.go.jp/sousei/info/pdf/r1-12-20-senryaku.pdf>.
- Kawabata, Namiki 川端 南実希 / Kawahara, Susumu 川原 晋 / Hirata, Norie 平田 徳恵. 2017. "Machi, hito, shigoto sōsei sōgō senryaku ni okeru kankō kanren hyōka shihyō no keikō ni

- kansuru kenkyū” まち・ひと・しごと創生総合戦略における観光関連評価指標の傾向に関する研究 [Study on the Evaluation of Indicators Related to Tourism Set by Local Government: Some Cases of “Comprehensive Regional Strategy”]. *Toshi keikaku* 都市計画 [City planning review], 2017: 101–4.
- Kotakemori, Kō 小竹森晃. 2016. “Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai” no seisaku mokuteki to jittai: Tottori-ken Chizu-chō o jirei ni” [The Policy Objective of the “Community Co-builders”: The example of Chizu-chō, Tottori Prefecture]「地域おこし協力隊」の政策目的と実態: 鳥取県智頭町を事例に. *Doshisha seisaku kagaku insei ronshū* 同志社政策科学院生論集 [Doshisha policy and management review] 5: 41–52.
- Kumagai, Fumie. 2020. *Municipal Power and Population Decline in Japan: Goki-Shichido and Regional Variations*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Marier, Patrik. 2008. “Empowering Epistemic Communities: Specialised Politicians, Policy Experts and Policy Reform.” *West European Politics* 31, no. 1: 513–33.
- Maruyama, Yasushi 丸山康司. 2005. “Kankyō sōzō ni okeru shakai no dainamizumu: Fūryoku hatsuden jigyo e no akutā nettowāku riron no tekiyō” 環境創造における社会のダイナミズム: 風力発電事業へのアクターネットワーク理論の適用 [The social dynamism of environmental creation: An application of the actor-network-theory to wind power generation projects]. *Kankyō shakaigaku kenkyū* 環境社会学研究 [Journal of Environmental Sociology] 11: 131–44.
- Matsuoka, Shunji 松岡俊二. 2018. “Jizoku kanō na chiiki shakai no tsukurikata: Chihō sōsei to shakai inobeshon o kangaeru” 持続可能な地域社会のつくりかた: 地方創生と社会イノベーションを考える [Building Sustainable Local Society in Japan: Local Revitalisation and Social Innovation]. *Asia taiheiyō tōkyū* アジア太平洋討究 [Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies] 33: 1–18.
- Nakamura, Yūji 中村祐司. 2015. “Chihō sōsei o meguru sōgō senryaku to chihō jichitai: Kokusaku kara jichi e no tenkan wa kanō ka” 地方創生をめぐる総合戦略と地方自治体: 国策から自治への転換は可能か [General Strategy and Local Government for Regional Revitalisation: Conversion from National Policy to Autonomy]. *Utsunomiya daigaku kokusai gakubu kenkyū ronshū* 宇都宮大学国際学部研究論集 [Journal of the Faculty of International Studies, Utsunomiya University] 40: 43–48.
- Nekola, Martin / Kohoutek, Jan. 2017. “Policy Formulation as Policy Work: Developing Options for Government.” In *Handbook of Policy Formulation*, edited by Michael Howlett / Ishani Mukherjee, 39–62. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Obikwelu, Faith E. 2018. “Challenges of Living in Rural Communities of Japan: I-Turners’ Perspectives.” *Mem. Fac. Agr. Kindai Univ.* 51: 24–33.
- Ochi, Masaki 越智正樹. 2019. “Kyōiku ryokō minpaku ni okeru hyōjunka to kosei iji” 教育旅行民泊における平準化と個性維持 [Maintaining the standardization and individuality of private accommodations for educational travels]. *Nishinihon shakaigaku gakkai nenpō* 西日本社会学会年報 [Journal of the Sociological Society of West Japan] 17: 33–46.
- Ōkubo, Hisayo 大窪久代. 2013. “Hisho sanruikei to sono kadai” 秘書三類型とその課題 [The three types of policy secretaries and their challenges]. *Shōkei gakusō* 商経学叢 [Journal of Business Studies], 169: 57–87.
- Okubo, Mika / Abrar, Juhar Mohammed / Makoto, Inoue. 2016. “Out-Migrants and Local Institutions: Case Study of a Depopulated Mountain Village in Japan.” *Asian Culture and History* 8, no. 1: 1–9.
- Page, Edward C. 2010. “Bureaucrats and Expertise: Elucidating a Problematic Relationship in Three Tableaux and Six Jurisdictions.” *Sociologie du Travail* 52, no. 2: 255–73.
- Reiher, Cornelia. 2020. “Embracing the Periphery: Urbanites’ Motivations for Relocating to Rural Japan.” In *Japan’s New Ruralities: Coping with Decline in the Periphery*, edited by Wolfram Manzenreiter / Ralph Lützel / Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, 230–44. Milton: Routledge.
- Sasakawa, Kiriko 笹川貴吏子. 2017. “Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai’in no hen’yō katei ni kansuru ichikōsatsu” [The transformation of the Rural Revitalization Corps Program]. 地域おこし協力隊員の変容過程に関する一考察. *Ōyō shakaigaku kenkyū* 応用社会学研究 [The Journal of Applied Sociology] 59: 311–25.

- Shibazaki, Kōhei 柴崎浩平 / Nakatsuka, Masaya 中塚雅也. 2017. “Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai no chiiki komittomento no tokusei: Teijū ikō to no chigai ni chakumoku shite” 地域おこし協力隊員の地域コミットメントの特性: 定住意向との違いに着目して [Property of Regional Commitment of the Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad: Focusing on the Difference with the Intention to Live Permanently]. *Nōringyō mondai kenkyū* 農林業問題研究 [Journal of Rural Problems] 53, no. 4: 227–34.
- Shiikawa, Shinobu 椎川忍 / Odagiri, Tokumi 小田切徳美 / Satō, Keitarō 佐藤啓太郎. 2019. Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai jūnen no chōsen [Rural Revitalization Corps Program: 10-year challenges]. 地域おこし協力隊: 10年の挑戦. *Nōsangyoson bunka kyōkai* 農山漁村文化協会 [Rural Culture Association].
- Taguchi, Tarō 田口太郎. 2018. “Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai’ no seika to kadai, kongo no hōkōsei” 地域おこし協力隊の成果と課題、今後の方向性. *Shinrin kankyō kenkyūkai hen* 森林環境研究会編 2018: 158–67.
- Takamura, Akiteru / Matsumoto, Masatoshi / Ishikawa, Shizukiyo. 2017. “Rural Health in Japan: Past and Future.” *Rural and Remote Health* 17, no. 4: 4521.
- Vedung, Evert. 2012. “Six Models of Evaluation.” In *Routledge Handbook of Public Policy*, 1st ed., edited by Eduardo Araral / Scott Fritzen / Michael Howlett / M. Ramesh / Xun Wu, 387–400. New York: Routledge.
- Watanabe, Yasuaki 泰明 渡辺. 2001. “Shichōson gappei ni tsuite: Shōnai-shi no jirei” 市町村合併について: 庄内市の事例 [Municipal mergers: The case of Shōnai City]. *Tōhoku kōeki bunka daigaku sōgō kenkyū ronshū: Forum 21* 東北公益文科大学総合研究論集: [Forum 21 Tohoku University of Community Service and Science, Departmental Bulletin Paper]: 157–178.
- Wijaya, Ni Made Sofia. 2013. “Contemporary Problems in Japan’s Rural Areas and Opportunities for Developing Rural Tourism: A Case of Yamashiro District in Yamaguchi Prefecture.” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11: 50–72.
- Wirth, Peter / Elis, Volker / Müller, Bernhard / Yamamoto, Kenji. 2016. “Peripheralization of Small Towns in Germany and Japan: Dealing with Economic Decline and Population Loss.” *Journal of Rural Studies* 47: 6–75.
- Yamaya, Kiyoshi. 2002. “The Art of Policy Evaluation in Japan.” In *International Atlas of Evaluation*, edited by Jan-Eric Furubo / Ray C. Rist / Rolf Sandahl Ip. Canada: Transaction Publishers.
- Yoshizawa, Yūki 吉澤佑葵. 2019. “Chūō seifu ni okeru ‘chihōsōsei’ no seisaku katei to seifu kan kankei” 中央政府における「地方創生」の政策過程と政府間関係 [Intergovernmental Relations under Policy-Making Process of Regional Revitalisation]. *Seiji keizaigaku kenkyū ronshū* 政治経済学研究論集 [Journal of Political Science and Economics] 4: 2–20.
- Zushi, Naoya 囃司直也. 2013. “Chiiki sapōto jinzai no seisakuteki haikai to hyōkajiku no kentō” 地域サポート人材の政策的背景と評価軸の検討 [The Political Context and Evaluation Axis of Supporters of Rural Communities]. *Nōson keikaku gakkai shi* 農村計画学会誌 [Journal of the Rural Planning Association] 32, no. 3: 350–53.

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 / Perin 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 Klein 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." *Tracés. 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, Kenjiro 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一系譜論的試論 [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 / Hjørth, 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 Lützel / 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 Lützel / 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.





# **PART 4**

## **Book Talk**



## 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 of 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 countryside 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 interesting. 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 important feature of what is happening in rural parts of Japan, but each of the people 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 actually 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 or 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-à-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.

## Contributors

### RABIA DEVECI

...is an undergraduate student at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna. Her bachelor's thesis focuses on the territorial conflict between Japan and Russia. She participated in the analysis of data gathered at the Aso Winter Field School 2022 by the group working on migration.

### WILHELM DONKO

...is a graduate student at the University of Vienna studying Japanese studies. He is currently an exchange student at Waseda University in Tōkyō, Japan. During the Aso Winter Field School in 2022, he was part of a group studying tourism in the Aso region in Kumamoto Prefecture.

### HANNAH PILAR EGGER

...is a graduate student at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna, researching discourses of disability and identity politics concerning socio-structural dynamics in the Japanese deaf community. She participated in the analysis of data gathered at the Aso Winter Field School 2022 by the social welfare project group.

### MAXIMILIAN FORTIN

...participated as an undergraduate student at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna in the Aso Winter Field School. Being interested in Japanese culture and history, as well as in what ways that culture has been changing, he joined the tourism group. The group focused on natural catastrophes including the COVID-19 pandemic and how they affected the region.

### KALOYAN IVANOV

...is an undergraduate student of both Japanese studies as well as English and American studies. Their main research focus is in the field of media and film studies. They were part of the Aso Winter Field School 2022, working on migration.

**HANNO JENTZSCH**

...is a political scientist and lecturer at the Leiden Institute for Area Studies. After receiving his PhD from the University of Duisburg-Essen in March 2016, he worked as senior research fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tōkyō and as assistant professor at the University of Vienna. His research interests include decentralisation, the political economy of “rural revitalisation” in Japan, the Japanese welfare state, and the relationship between civil society and the local state. His first monograph *Harvesting State Support* (University of Toronto Press, 2021) analyzed institutional change in Japan’s aging agricultural sector.

**CECILIA LUZI**

...obtained her B.A. in ethnology and social anthropology at the University of Siena, Italy. Later, she completed her M.A. in social anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris, France. She also holds a B.A. and an M1 in Japanese studies from the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO). She is currently a PhD candidate at Freie Universität Berlin, and research assistant at the Institute of Japanese Studies in the DFG project “Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan”. Her PhD research focuses on the experience of urban-to-rural migrants in two municipalities in northern Kyūshū, and in particular on the practices and discourses of home-making.

**MEGUMI FAITH MALLARI**

...is a fourth-year undergraduate student of political science and anthropology at Sophia University, Tōkyō. She is a research assistant for the Refugee Voices Japan project and is one of the leaders of the Sophia Refugee Support Group, a student-led volunteer group conducting practical support for asylum seekers in Japan. Motivated by her research and experience of support, she plans to pursue a Masters Degree to specialize in forced displacement and refugee response next year.

**WOLFRAM MANZENREITER**

...is professor of Japanese studies at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Vienna, since 2013. He is author of several books and numerous articles and book chapters on social and anthro-

pological aspects of sports, emotions, work and migration in contemporary Japan. His current research interests include happiness, mobilities and the diversity of lifeways in the peripheries of a globalised world. He recently published the co-edited volumes on Japan's New Ruralities *Coping with Decline in the Periphery* (Routledge 2020), and *Japan through the Lens of the Tokyo Olympics* (Routledge 2020).

#### JOHANNA MAYR

...is a graduate student at the University of Vienna (Japanese studies and the master's program "German as a Foreign and Second Language"). She participated in the Aso Winter Field School 2022, focusing on social organisation and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the community of the Aso region.

#### ANTONIA MISERKA

...is a PhD student at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna. Her research focusses on rural regions in contemporary Japan, specifically the every-day lives of locals and newcomers within the Aso region in Kumamoto, Japan. In her PhD thesis she analyses the connection between social relationships, regional landscape and well-being of residents of the Aso region.

#### LENKA MIYANOHARA

...is a graduate student at the Department of East Asia Studies at the University of Vienna. For her master's thesis, she focuses on the well-being of elderly women in rural Japan—Sakurajima. She was a part of the Aso Winter Field School 2022, working on social organisation.

#### JULIANA NEUNINGER

...is a graduate student at the University of Vienna (Japanese studies and translation studies). Her research focuses on revitalisation initiatives in rural Japan, which she plans to take up as the topic of her master's thesis. She was part of the Aso Winter Field School 2022, working on migration.

#### TU THANH NGO

...joined the Freie Universität Berlin in 2020, as part of the project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan" led by Prof.

Dr. Cornelia Reiher. He works as a research assistant (PhD candidate) in the sub-project “The periphery and the center: Support schemes for urban-rural migration and their local appropriation”, which investigates Japan’s revitalisation policies at the national, prefectural, and municipal levels. Between May and October 2022, he conducted field-work in five field sites, namely Tōkyō, Fukuoka, Nagasaki, Buzen, and Hasami. He holds an M.A. in political science (public policy) from the Central European University and a B.A. in Japanese politics and global studies from Doshisha University.

**KATJA PALASZEWSKI**

...is an undergraduate student of Japanese studies at the University of Vienna, Department of East Asian Studies. She acted as team leader for the social welfare research group in the Aso Winter Field School 2022, which focused on loneliness in the region. Her main research interests include Japan as a welfare state and Japanese foreign policy. In her bachelor’s she focuses on Japan’s strategic interests in the Pacific Island countries.

**SEBASTIAN POLAK-ROTTMANN**

...is senior research fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ). He received his PhD from the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna in 2022, working on well-being in rural Japan funded by a DOC-team grant of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His current research focuses on resilience in rural Japan, including community integrated care and political participation. Together with Hanno Jentzsch, he organised the Aso Winter Field School 2022, an online field school for undergraduate and graduate students on the impacts of the pandemic in rural Japan.

**STEFAN PÖLLITZER**

...is an undergraduate student at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna. He primarily researches popular culture and gender dynamics, but is interested in developments in rural Japan. He participated in the Aso Winter Field School 2022, where he worked on social welfare.

**CORNELIA REIHER**

...is professor of Japanese studies at Freie Universität Berlin, vice director of the Graduate School of East Asian Studies and PI of the DFG research project “Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan”. Her main research interests include rural Japan, globalisation, food studies and science and technology studies. Recent publications include the co-edited methods handbook (with Nora Kottmann) *Studying Japan: Handbook of research designs, fieldwork and methods* (2020) as well as book chapters and journal articles on urbanites relocating to rural Japan (2020, 2022), transnational food activism (2022) and Berlin’s Japanese foodscapes (2022).

**BENEDIKT SCHULTZ**

...participated as undergraduate student at the Department of East Asia Studies at the University of Vienna in the Aso Winter Field School. With an interest in local community life and its changes, he joined the team looking at social organisation and structure of the Aso region in Japan, community life and activities and how these have been affected by the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

**TOBIAS SIMEK**

...is a Japanese studies bachelor’s degree and a law studies master’s degree holder. His research focused on Japanese history of law and organisational structures of governmental entities and other public authorities. He assisted the social welfare project group of the Aso Winter Field School 2022 in the analysis of the gathered data.

**DAVID H. SLATER**

...is a professor of cultural anthropology and Japanese studies at Sophia University, Tōkyō. He has worked on youth labour, urban space and place, disaster and recovery, social movements, and migrant and refugee displacement.

**AYANO SOMA**

...is a graduate of the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University, Tōkyō. After carrying out an oral narrative project with a Syrian refugee as part of Refugee Voices Japan, she returned to the project as a *senpai* (senior) student with mentoring responsibility. She is currently



pursuing a master's degree in international social and public policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science where she is researching the policy context in the relation between the issuance of work permits for asylum seekers and the spread of the term "fake refugee" in Japan.

**MELANIE STEINBRUGGER**


...is a graduate student at the University of Vienna studying Japanese studies with a focus on social sciences. She is currently doing an exchange year at Meiji University in Tōkyō, Japan. During the Aso Winter Field School in 2022, she was part of a group studying tourism in the Aso region in Kumamoto Prefecture. She currently examines the role of health care workers in rural areas using the Aso region as a case study for her Master's thesis.

**THAW TAR**

...is a graduate from the Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University, where he majored in anthropology and political science. As an international student coming from Myanmar, he is interested in studying the relationship between developed and developing countries. He plans on becoming an academic researcher one day to promote knowledge sharing and contribute to policy making in the context of international development.

**JOHN W. TRAPHAGAN**

... is an anthropologist and Visiting Research Scholar in the Interplanetary Initiative at Arizona State University. He is Professor Emeritus in the Program in Human Dimensions of Organizations at the University of Texas at Austin and a Visiting Professor in the Center for International Education at Waseda University in Tōkyō. His research has appeared in numerous scientific journals. His most recent books on Japan include *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in 21st Century Japan* (2020) and *The Blood of Gutoku: A Jack Riddle Mystery in Japan* (2021).



This volume collects three group projects from Sophia University, University of Vienna and FU Berlin that involve students as researchers at different stages in their academic lives. In all three cases, students actively participated in gathering data for a group project and reflected on their experiences. We emphasise that students, rather than being mere receivers of knowledge, may also actively contribute to academic research and be part of the collaborative production of knowledge. Further, we show how research as a team has to be adjusted, but nevertheless can be conducted despite the troubling circumstances of the pandemic.

**Antonia Miserka** is a PhD student at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna. Her research focusses on rural regions in contemporary Japan, specifically the every-day lives of locals and newcomers within the Aso region in Kumamoto, Japan. In her PhD thesis she analyses the connection between social relationships, regional landscape and well-being of residents of the Aso region.

**Sebastian Polak-Rottmann** is senior research fellow at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ). He received his PhD from the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna in 2022, working on well-being in rural Japan funded by a DOC-team grant of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. His current research focuses on resilience in rural Japan, including community integrated care and political participation. Together with Hanno Jentzsch, he organised the Aso Winter Field School 2022, an online field school for undergraduate and graduate students on the impacts of the pandemic in rural Japan.