Remaking the rural: Alternative forms of revitalization in post-growth Japan

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ABSTRACT

Japan is one of the first countries to enter a post-growth era characterized by demographic and economic decline. The pressing issues of a decreasing and aging population call for an evaluation of current planning and governance. This paper examines existing urban-rural linkages in Japan under the framework of a post-growth society to learn how both top-down government-initiated strategies in conjunction with creative approaches at the grassroots level can work together to address the urban-rural divide. The research draws on ethnographic data collected over a two-year period that includes interviews with rural migrants, local community residents and staff of non-profit organizations to shed light on current experiences of people living and working in these remote but active communities. The results reveal the increasingly important role of rural migrants and repeat visitors who are playing a key role in the shaping of a new rural in the physical remaking of rural landscapes. The study may be useful to policy makers and those engaged in revitalization activities in rural communities to understand local perspectives on the challenges and opportunities associated with rural living in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Japan, rural revitalization, urban-rural linkages, community design, post-growth society*

INTRODUCTION

One of Japan's most pressing challenges today is a decreasing and rapidly aging population. The impacts are most severe and visible in the Japanese countryside. Many of Japan's regional cities, towns and village have been disappearing due to amalgamations and mergers aimed to save administrative costs. The most recent consolidation from the early 2000s, known as the *heisei dai gappei* (The Great Heisei Era Municipal Merger), resulted in a 40% reduction in Japan's cities, towns and villages with the majority of these from rural areas. Common sights in these rural areas include large areas of unclaimed land, empty schools, and as recorded by the latest 2018 Housing and land survey, over 8 million vacant houses which accounts for 13.6% of Japan's total housing stock.

Although there are some potential benefits, Japan's shrinking population brings a range of economic and social challenges which lead to an ultimate decrease in quality of life (Mantale and Rausch 2011). This serious issue has prompted various rural revitalization movements which have gained attention with growing English scholarship on the topic (see Kitano 2009; Mantale and Rausch 2011; Assmann 2016; Klien 2020). This study aims to contribute to the current discourse on rural revitalization by studying the social and physical transformations initiated by key actors who are shaping the image of a new rural. The study contributes original data in the form of interviews and on-site participation in various revitalization activities to provide updated insights into urban-rural linkages in contemporary Japan.

THE POST-GROWTH AND POST-URBAN PHONOMENON

According to 2018 United Nations data 92% of Japan's population resides in cities compared to a world average of 55%. Mass rural-urban migration occurred in the post-war era as Japan transformed itself into a developed and wealthy nation. Japan is still a highly centralized country with most of the top universities and companies concentrated in major cities which directly contribute to out-migration as rural youths relocate to pursue education and careers in city centres. Economic growth lasted until the burst of the so-called bubble economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s which saw a paradigm shift towards a post-growth society. Hard work and dedication to one's company no longer guarantees lifetime employment and house ownership as it did in the past. Japan's urban residents today face pressing challenges including increasing living costs and long working hours leading many to rethink their values and lifestyle choices. One of the key urban-rural linkages relate to the mobility of people themselves, specifically those that reverse the trend and move from urban to rural areas as either I-turners (those that have no connection to the place they move to) and U-turners (those that move back to their hometown after time away). Referred to as lifestyle migrants, a small but growing number of individuals are choosing alternative career paths by relocating to rural areas as a response to the realities of a post-growth, post-urban, post-consumer society (Klien 2020, 20). These migrants are usually well educated and aware of pressing environmental and ecological concerns as they seek work life balance, self-sufficiency, and a sense of personal fulfilment.

METHOD

This paper is based on an ongoing research project as part of the author's PhD research at Keio University. The research draws on the author's background as an architect and examines creative forms of revitalization with an emphasis on socially engaged practices that physically transform the environment. A mixed methods approach based on ethnographic research was adopted in the form of participant observation, informal and formal interviews, and on-site participation in various revitalization activities in rural Japan over a two-year period from 2018 – 2020. During visits and short stays in rural communities the author engaged in workshops and design build projects as part of Hiroto Kobayashi Lab, Keio University. Interviewees include rural migrants, long-term residents, and staff of NPOs involved in revitalization efforts across nine prefectures in Japan. Interactions during these visits were broad and inductive to understand the variety of revitalization efforts across different geographical contexts and the personal background of key actors involved. In order to focus the wealth of data collected the author draws on grounded theory to simultaneously collect, analyse, and

compare the data between different sites to identify different emerging trends in rural revitalization (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001).

The research transitioned to online methods at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional virtual fieldwork was conducted by considering the internet as both a place and research tool (Markham 2004) by analysing blogs and social media where rural residents post updates on their activities and daily life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via online platforms such as Facebook Messenger, Instagram Video Call and Zoom between April and November 2020 with over 40 respondents to understand the ongoing impacts of COVID-19. These included contacts the author interviewed in previous on-site fieldwork as well as new contacts the author had not met before. Thus, the field of study is not a clearly defined group of people bounded to one place but vast and multi-sited (Marcus 1995). Such "fuzzy fields" without clear boundaries are constructed by piecing together several sites to form the ethnographic field (Nadai and Maeder 2005). Limitations of this approach include a lack of depth due to shorter stays in the field but allows the potential for generalization to identity emerging trends across sites.

THE NEED FOR ALTERNATIVES TO TOP DOWN GOVERNANCE

Japan's high economic development in the post-war era is seen as a successful example of top-down state-initiated policies that guided industrialization leading to Japan's 'economic miracle.' The state has introduced a range of policies in a similar top-down approach to address rural depopulation as early as the 1950s with the first comprehensive plan named *kaso chiiki taisaku kinkyu sochiho* (Emergency Act for the Improvement of Depopulated Areas) introduced in 1970. However, growth-oriented policies had little success in rural areas while the population of Tokyo and the widening of the urban-rural wealth and population gap continued to grow. Public funds poured in from the 1980s attempting to address the gap including initiatives such as the *furusato sousei jigyou* (Home-town Creation Project) which awarded more than 3300 cities, towns and villages 100 million yen (more than US$750,000) to fund projects of their choice resulting in a surge in public building projects such as museums and other large scale facilities. Many were bland concrete boxes known as *hakomono* (translated as 'box object') but some rural areas sought out well-known architects and commissioned flagship buildings in an effort to create a unique brand identity that would entice visitors and boost local pride (Locher 2014).

Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's recent resignation in August 2020 called for an evaluation of Abe's 2012-2020 term which was seen to have mainly focused on economic and foreign policy achievements (known as Abenomics) but little progress in terms of rural revitalization to address Japan's depopulation issues (Hijino 2020). Abe's emphasis on decentralization shifted responsibilities to local governments to implement their own plans though the launch of the *chiho soseiho* (Regional Revitalization Act) in 2014. Local municipalities were left to come up with self-motivated place-making strategies at the grassroots level sustained by residents themselves. Though such practices have potential they are problematic in celebrating rural sustainability as a solely civic responsibility (Love 2013). When left to their own devices, only a handful of well-known cases have emerged in recent years prompting the need for top-down support from central government to work together with local municipalities for successful revitalization.

One policy that has been promising is the *chiiki okoshi kyoryokutai* program (roughly translates to Regional Revitalization Co-operators or Supporters of Regional Revitalization) program established by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication in 2009. The program recruits urbanites by offering

financial support and advice for individuals for up to three years to move to targeted declining rural areas to work on diverse regional revitalization activities. These include mission-based roles such as surveying vacant houses, or self-proposed roles defined by the individual such as engaging in agricultural activities, hand craft, developing and branding local products and so on. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the number of people taking part in the first year of 2009 was 89, which rose to over 5000 people in 2018. Amongst the 40% that are women participants, 70% of these are young women in their 20s and 30s with over half deciding to stay in their chosen rural home once the program and financial support ended.

FIELDWORK RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A female participant in her mid-thirties originally from a prefecture near Tokyo moved to a remote island of 3000 people in Ehime Prefecture, some 850km south of Tokyo. Together with her husband she applied to the *chiiki okoshi kyoryokutai* program in 2011 soon after the Great East Japan Earthquake, which was one of the triggers for the move, "When you live in the city you actually depend on so many things outside of your control such as electricity, gas, food…the earthquake made me realize that." Before the move she had a stable job in marketing in Tokyo but was often working overtime. Though demanding, she did not dislike the work as it brought fulfilment, however life was centred on 'working' rather than 'living', "I had no time to eat slowly and enjoy life outside of work. I had reached the end of my twenties and thought it was time to make a decision to change my future." Once she had finished the program she decided to settle on the island with her husband as they enjoyed the island lifestyle and found the community welcoming. The pair found a 100-year old house through the local online vacant house bank and renovated it into their own residence with a guest house and café on site. Empty farmland nearby was rented to start an organic vegetable production business with emphasis on sustainability rather than growth, "we deliver seasonal vegetable boxes directly to customer's homes using postal services. It is enough to have 50 families subscribe as we cannot cater for more than that with our current resources. We would rather develop a deeper relationship with customers rather than expanding the business" (Interview November 18 2019).

Figure 1: Café renovated from traditional vacant house that opened in 2015 on a small island in the Seto Inland Sea. Photo by the author.

Another migrant in his early forties with three children currently works from home as a freelance writer and photographer while his wife operates a small cafe selling handmade bread and cakes. The house and café are renovated from a traditional folk-house with a stylish rustic aesthetic similar (see Figure 1). Quaint cafes like these with simple but tasteful designs breathe new life into old vacant buildings, a stark contrast to the large concrete boxes from the 1980s many of which had become dilapidated once public funding ceased. The café's customers are a mix of locals and visitors as the island is close to the popular *shimanami kaido* cycling route though it is not directly connected by bridge meaning visitors must consciously make the decision to visit. One of the customers saw the bakery on social media and made the trip to the island to try it out. The increased visibility of the rural in the virtual realm directly contributes to a rebranding and remaking beyond physical buildings and products attracting tourists and potential migrants.

Indeed, tourism has been one of the main sources of income for many rural areas. Curator and writer Kayoko Ota described tourism as a 'magic bullet' that can reverse the fates of rural areas including remote islands (Ota 2018). Many prestigious Japanese architects have turned their attention to rural areas in recent years including Kazuyo Sejima on the small island of Inujima, Tadao Ando on Naoshima Island, and Toyo Ito on Omishima Island. Sejima and Ando's intervention are part of a large-scale art festival called the Setouchi Art Triennale which started in 2000 and has since attracted over one million visitors in the latest 2019 edition (Art Setouchi 2019). Though often cited as a successful case of rural revitalization that has led the way for numerous art festivals popping up throughout rural Japan, the art island model has also been criticized as a largely top-down privatized affair with mixed feelings from the residents themselves who do not always benefit directly from tourism (Qu 2019). Tourism alone is not sufficient as a means to revitalization as demonstrated in the well-known case Yubari, a former mining town near Sapporo, which underwent an expensive transformation into a tourist destination that eventually resulted in the town's bankruptcy (Mantale and Rausch 2011).

Another city that has been experiencing revival at the community grassroots level is the port city of Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture. It is one end of the popular *shimanami kaido* cycling route which links Onomichi to the town of Imabari via a dedicated cycling track that passes through six islands. Migrants moving to Onomichi in recent years have gained attention for their involvement with a citizen-led movement that renovates vacant houses into guest houses, artist in residences, boutique shops and bookstores (Figure 2). One of the key instigators of the movement is a non-profit organization called *Onomichi Akiya Saisei* (Vacant House Renewal Project) initiated by a U-turn female migrant. This group maintains a database of available vacant houses that helps match new incoming migrants with suitable sites as well as a support network of DIY enthusiasts that help connect renovators to trades and crafts people. A young male in his twenties who works part time in a guest house renovated and owned by the NPO shared his plans of opening a curry shop in a vacant house after he completes renovations. He pays 10,000JPY a month on rent (approx. US$90) which is easy to cover with his various part-time jobs. While working few days a week as a guest house staff member, he commutes to Tokyo every month to work as a DJ and spends other times on renovationing his curry restaurant project. The idea of DIY and self-reliance is strengthened by strong local social networks as he comments, "everyone does their own thing here in Onomichi, they open their own café or shop based on their interests. It is exciting to live here without too much stress as the costs are low and the people make life interesting" (Interview November 15 2019).

Figure 2: Guest house in Onomichi, owned and operated by the local NPO a*kiya saisei* (Onomichi Vacant House Renewal Project) that opened in 2012. Photo by the author.

The great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011 triggered the rise of social design in the form of soc ally engaged and participatory placemaking practices (Dimmer 2016). Dimmer (2016) points out the crucial role architects, artists, activists, community designers and social innovators plan in reconstructing not only post-disaster areas but Japan's declining communities as well. An example of social design is the series of Veneer House projects initiated by Hiroto Kobayashi Lab at Keio University in a series of design build projects called 'Veneer House' constructed in various locations in Japan and some overseas (see Figure 3). The project was a direct response to the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 to provide temporary communal facilities to affected areas. The self-build construction system can be easily assembled by non-skilled labour including student and local volunteers without the need for specialized tools. While government responses have usually focused on infrastructure development projects, NPOs, social enterprises and Universities are forming a new kind of community governance through grassroot efforts. Teraoka (2020) has described the increased mobility of this group of mainly young people as *kankei jinko* (relationship population) as opposed to *koryu jinko* (temporary visitors, mainly tourists). This emerging relational population that sits between tourists and settlers are becoming a key group in the study of urban-rural linkages and their contribution to the image of a new rural deserves to be further studied.

Figure 3: A design build veneer house project near completion in Fukushima by Hiroto Kobayashi Lab, Keio University, 2018. Photo by the author.

CONCLUSION

During times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the strengths of these urban-rural linkages are being tested. Japan declared a state of emergency on April 7 2020 in seven prefectures of Tokyo, Saitama, Chiba, Kanagawa, Osaka, Hyogo and Fukuoka. International travel was suspended from April 2 2020 which drastically reduced tourism numbers and highlighted the dangers of an overreliance on tourism. City dwellers have expressed increased interest in relocating to rural Japan since the COVID-19 pandemic as alternatives to the stress and congestion of city life with article titles such as 'Rural migration driven by coronavirus' (Japan Today 2020). With advancements in technology and telework, many companies are considering moving into regional areas. A prominent staffing agency, Pasona Group Inc., recently announced plans to relocate around 1200 staff from Tokyo to the Awaji Island in Hyogo Prefecture (The Japan Times 2020).

The paper has elaborated on the challenges and opportunities relating to rural life in post-growth Japan and identified three key urban-rural linkages 1) urban to rural migrants who seek alternative forms of living not attainable in urban centres who are directly shaping the rural into hybrid places that offer the best of both urban (e.g. stylish coffee shops) and rural (e.g. nature) elements, 2) a 'relational population' comprised of people who do not live in rural areas but conduct various activities there including students and professionals such as architects who engage in various forms of social exchange, and 3) tourist who mainly contribute their money into supporting the efforts of the former two. Newcomers whether temporary, relational, or long-term contribute their own social, cultural, and economic capital which is much needed for revitalization. These urban-rural linkages are made possible by a combination of top-down structural changes such as support programs by the government, local NPOs and a changing view on the state and image of rural areas.

A slow rural renaissance in Japan has been largely shaped by the mobility of both people and goods which have become more fluid and frequent. Advancements in technology including high speed

internet services that enable online shopping and remote working no longer bind people to a physical place allowing double lives that involve commuting between urban and rural areas. This is also true for researchers who can now study the internet as a digital field remotely through online interviews and examining social media data. Time will tell whether the pandemic will trigger significant numbers of urban to rural migration, but what is certain is that the gradual increase in cases of urban-rural mobility that enable creative revitalization on the local level are promising in redefining the future of post-growth Japan.

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