

Konferenzberichte

Urban-rural Migration in Japan and Europe: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives

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Report by Cecilia Luzi and Tu Thanh Ngo

Rural areas in many parts of the world face economic and demographic challenges and are often confronted with the migration of rural populations to urban centers. This is particularly true for communities in rural Japan, which have been affected by declining birth rates, aging, and out-migration for decades. Over the past decade, however, there has been a sharp increase in both the number of people interested in moving from urban to rural areas in Japan and the number who actually make the move. A distinctive feature of Japan is the numerous programs and subsidies initiated by various actors to encourage people to move to or return to rural Japan in order to revitalize the local economy and agriculture. Shortly after the Japanese government launched new financial support measures in early 2023 to encourage people to leave Tokyo and move to the countryside, the symposium “Urban-rural Migration in Japan and Europe: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives” was held on February 2–3, 2023 at the Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB). The aim of the symposium, organized by Cornelia Reiher (Freie Universität Berlin), was to compare empirical results from her DFG project “Urban-rural Migration and Rural Revitalization in Japan” with urban-rural migration within and outside of Japan, and to analyze connections between urban-rural migration, revitalization practices and support measures. Anthropologists, architects, area studies specialists, consultants, geographers, municipal officials, political scientists, and sociologists from various European countries and Japan took turns on the panel to discuss the challenges of urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan and European countries, highlighting similarities, differences, and transnational trends.

After the opening speeches by Tokiko Kiyota (JDZB) and Cornelia Reiher, two keynote presentations focused on counter-urbanization in Japan and Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Susanne Klien (Hokkaido University) focused on self-determination and subjective well-being, but also on loneliness and precarity in the lives of migrants after relocation to rural Japan. Introducing the term “urbanrural”,

she emphasized the increasing hybridization of urban and rural spaces, especially at a time when people can transcend space through digital media. Keith Halfacree (Swansea University) presented the case of rural England and Wales, emphasizing that the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the food production crisis will have long-term effects on these areas. He argued that counter-urbanization can provide an opportunity for rural revitalization and renaissance, but it can also widen the gap between urban and rural areas.

The first day ended with a roundtable discussion led by Cornelia Reiher. The two keynote speakers were joined on stage by consultant Taichi Goto (Region Works LLC Fukuoka) and Annett Steinführer (Thünen Institute for Rural Studies). After their brief opening statements, the discussion focused on the impact of the Covid pandemic on rural areas in Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the challenges and promises associated with urban-rural migration and counter-urbanization for rural revitalization in the three countries; it addressed issues such as housing, relationships between locals and newcomers, and how to create places where diverse rural residents can meet. Panelists emphasized that there are more dividing lines than those between ‘locals’ and ‘newcomers’, and that research should pay more attention to more fluid forms of migration and mobility, such as second-home owners or people with multiple residences.

The second day comprised four sessions, each with three presentations. To facilitate cross-national comparisons, each panel consisted of a presentation on Japan, Germany, and another European country. The first session, devoted to the experiences of urban-rural migrants and their contributions to rural areas, was opened by Wolfram Manzenreiter (University of Vienna), who presented findings from collaborative research on community well-being in Greater Aso in Japan. He focused on the notion of belonging and the importance of personal background for community engagement. Tim Leibert (Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography) presented the example of the district of North Saxony, showing the influence of individual social networks on the decision of urban residents to move from Leipzig to rural areas. To conclude the first panel, Anja Decker (Czech Academy of Sciences) presented her research on urban-rural migrants in western rural Czechia and on cooperation and conflicts between newcomers and the local population facilitated by alternative food practices.

In the second panel, the DFG project “Urban-rural Migration and Rural Revitalization in Japan” was presented. First, Cornelia Reiher, the project leader, introduced the research project in general and reported some preliminary findings from her own field research in two communities. She spoke about topics such as the role of local governments in migration decisions, and rural revitalization, changes brought about by new practices linking online and offline spaces, and increasing diversity in rural Japan. The project’s two research assistants then presented their research. Ngo Tu Thanh (Freie Universität Berlin) discussed the case of Buzen City,

a small municipality in the southeastern border of Fukuoka Prefecture, from a public policy perspective, emphasizing the important role of international migration and cooperation in rural revitalization. Cecilia Luzi (Freie Universität Berlin) also spoke about Buzen City, but from the perspective of urban-rural migrants. She showed that rural revitalization is not a uniform process, but a multifaceted phenomenon that takes different and sometimes contradictory forms.

The third panel focused on the role of politics and policies in urban-rural migration and rural revitalization. Participants included both scholars and practitioners. Ken Hijino (Kyoto University) provided information on general trends in policies to attract new residents to rural areas in Japan and the role that depopulation and attracting new residents play in mayoral elections. Dietmar Henrich, mayor of Hamm (Sieg) in Germany, presented his municipality and the challenges it faces due to population decline, and discussed creative solutions to promote in-migration. Finally, Angel Paniagua Mazorra (Spanish Council for Scientific Research), participating online, spoke about his twenty years of research on natives and newcomers in remote rural areas in Spain, addressing some methodological challenges and personal perceptions of change in these areas, including infrastructure improvement.

The fourth panel focused on the future of rural areas and urban-rural migration. Tadashi Saito (Yamaguchi University) introduced a new research method called “verbs-extracting research method, VERM” to analyze and explore new opportunities for tourism in rural Japan by focusing on the actions of research participants. Annett Steinführer discussed terminologies and presented findings on the reasons, motives and social structure of people who move from urban to rural areas in Germany. Lastly, Susanne Stenbacka (Uppsala University) discussed three aspects of migration in rural Sweden, namely the increase in international migration, the immigration of socio-economically weak households, and the increased demand for vacation homes and permanent housing in rural areas.

In the final discussion, Cornelia Reiher, Susanne Klien, Tim Leibert, Anja Decker, and Keith Halfacree reflected on the themes discussed during the symposium. The central themes they identified were the incompatibility of local needs and national funding plans for rural areas, the incongruence of administrative and social boundaries, and competition between local governments. Conflicting representations of rural areas, access to land, land prices, finding suitable housing, and building a home were important issues for newcomers and long-term residents of rural areas that led to conflicts and political disputes in both Japan and European countries. The main target group of policies for developing rural areas and attracting new residents were surprisingly similar in all countries: young families were to be attracted to move to the countryside through relocation fairs, financial incentives and the provision of housing. Panelists discussed whether attracting new residents is really a solution to rural problems, and suggested that depopulation could also be

seen as an opportunity from a posthuman perspective. Considering all these aspects, depopulation in rural Japan seems to be more serious than in other countries, but is not so unique after all. Overall, the symposium encouraged all participants to continue this conversation, to pay more attention to more unstable types of mobilities, and to reflect more on the terminology used when discussing mobilities to rural areas.

Cecilia Luzi, M. A.

Research Assistant, Institute of Japanese Studies, FU Berlin
c.luzi@fu-berlin.de

Tu Thanh Ngo

Institute of Japanese Studies, Freie Universität Berlin
t.ngo@fu-berlin.de