

Lifestyle migrants in Japan’s Seto Inland Sea’s islands: beyond Western-based conceptualizations of lifestyle migration

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Abstract

Small island communities in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan are undergoing a dramatic demographic and social-economic decline, with many facing the possibility of disappearing over the next decades. Like much of rural Japan, they are characterized by processes of aging and depopulation that result in a stagnating economy, the degradation of public services and infrastructure, abandonment, and a pervasive narrative of decline and hopelessness. To counter these issues, local governments have launched community revitalization projects, many of which focus on attracting new residents or encouraging former out-migrants to return. Increasing hope is being placed on domestic in-migrants from urban areas, as they are considered vital for bringing population and human resources back to declining peripheral areas. Both thanks to policy efforts and to broader changes in societal conditions – most recently the increasing acceptance of remote work due to COVID-19 – a growing number of people is indeed choosing to move to rural areas (including small islands).

Based on ongoing participant observation (4 years, 17 islands), and semi-structured interviews with in-migrants (n=45), we briefly examine the characteristics of newcomers to the Seto Inland Sea islands, focusing on those moving for lifestyle reasons (i.e. not primarily family or work related). This feature connects with the concept of ‘lifestyle migration’ (O’Reilly & Benson, 2009) discussed in the international literature in relation to island and seaside destinations, but at the same time is characterized by some features peculiar to the Japanese contexts.

Lifestyle migrants in rural Japan are predominantly Japanese nationals, particularly younger (20s-40s) urban people seeking lifestyle change and more meaningful ways of living. Their motivations are similar to those found in the international literature on lifestyle migration which often mentions the search for a ‘slow’ life, better work-life balance, and the possibility of being ‘one’s own boss’ (e.g. by starting independent businesses). In addition, the search for more space and natural amenities, and for a stronger sense of community, are also common themes (Benson, 2009; Gosnell & Abrams, 2009; O’Reilly & Benson, 2009). Many Japanese migrants are attracted by the possibility to engage in rural-based lifestyles that include farming and self-provisioning (McGreevy, Kobayashi, & Tanaka, 2019; Zollet & Maharjan, 2021). One example is the popularity of the concept of *han-nou han-x* (half farmer half ‘x’)(Shiomi, 2003), that denotes people doing farming for self-sufficiency in addition to their own job or ‘calling’.

The motivation behind newcomers' reasons to relocate to small islands, as well as their post-migration practices, also have much in common with emerging scholarship on post-growth economies and more generally with alternative approaches to lifestyles, livelihoods and economic practices prioritising quality of life and social/environmental well-being over quantitative economic growth (Schmid, 2019; Schneider, Kallis, & Martinez-Alier, 2010). In Japan, these aspects are strengthened by the context of socio-economic decline of peripheral communities, with scholars speaking of 'depopulation dividend' (Matanle & Saez-Perez, 2019), and 'creative depopulation' (Sasaki, Kawai, & Hagiwara, 2014). An analysis of Japanese newcomers' lifestyle and practices reveals the centrality of similar topics. Their migration experience often takes the move from a redefinition of the meaning of a 'good' life, and of what is necessary to live well, with many emphasizing the importance of voluntary simplicity, downsizing material consumption, using creative strategies to 'make do' with what is locally available (re)using, repairing, up-cycling), as well as the value of localized lifestyles and self-sufficiency.

Another aspect that is often discussed in the international literature on lifestyle and amenity migration are the negative repercussions on receiving communities, such as gentrification, rising property prices, social conflict, in-migrant 'enclaves', economic disparities (Kondo, Rivera, & Rullman, 2012; Solana-Solana, 2010). In this respect, the Japanese context appears remarkably different. In Japan, the ability to attract new residents is now seen as essential for the survival of rural communities (Zollet & Qu, 2019), with in-migration being actively encouraged through national and local policies. One example is the now widespread government sponsored *Chiiki okoshi kyouryokutai* (Regional Revitalization Cooperation Group) program, through which newcomers receive a salary and housing for up to three years in exchange for engaging in activities that may benefit the local community (starting new businesses, social projects, etc.). Furthermore, Japan does not have a pre-existing significant counter-urbanization trend as that identified in other contexts (Dwight Hines, 2010; Halfacree, 2012), making it challenging to draw parallels between the dynamics of domestic urban-to-rural migration in Japan and those observed in the international literature.

The narratives of in-migrants also reveal a strong sense of responsibility towards the local community, which, especially in the case of those belonging to the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Group) becomes an explicit revitalization 'mission'. Many newcomers are attracted by the possibility of playing many roles in their new community, stemming from a sense that in small, depopulating areas, individual contributions more valuable and valued. Many use social media to convey positive images and narratives of island life, and the creation of new businesses is often guided by considerations for the local community and/or the local environment.

This is not to say, however, that the interaction between locals and newcomers is always free of conflict. In some cases newcomers clash with the aging locals' more 'fixed' mindset and unwillingness to change. Some in-migrants also eventually decide not to settle down in a community, an aspect that in interviews was sometimes attributed to newcomers being unable to adapt to the local community or being too 'self-centered'. Locals' expectations towards in-migrants may also not correspond to the characteristics of newcomers moving into the community (Qu, Coulton, & Funck, 2020).

Newcomers respond to the geographic and social isolation they sometimes experience by creating and engaging with a variety of networks, both local and translocal. These networks serve various purposes, such as providing practical and emotional support, facilitating

cooperation among businesses, or engaging with broader projects, such as those related to rural revitalization efforts. Through these networks, newcomers engage with a diversity of actors, although especially with other in-migrants.

Our ongoing study contributes to the understanding of how lifestyle migrants imagine, perform, reproduce and (re-)negotiate new lives in depopulating island communities in Japan. We interrogated their values and practices in an attempt to contextualize rural Japan within wider debates on lifestyle migration, rural revitalization strategies, and post-growth economies and societies. Further research is needed to create a more nuanced understanding of processes of lifestyle migration to small islands in non-western contexts and their implications for sustaining local communities, particularly regarding whether these lifestyles can be sustained in the long-term. In this sense, Japan is an especially relevant case study, as it is one of the countries where the compounded effects of demographic and economic decline have been manifesting the earliest, making it an important site for investigating the future of small island communities.

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