

How to Deal with “Return to Rural Living”

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Growing Interest in Rural Residency

According to the Cabinet Office’s survey, “Public opinion on rural villages,” the percentage of urban residents who responded as “hav(ing)” or “somewhat hav(ing)” the desire to live in the countryside increased from twenty percent in 2005 to thirty percent in 2014 (Figure 1)¹⁾. As seen in the similar results published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications in 2017, the results of the 2014 survey of thirty percent indicate that there is a growing interest in the countryside among urban residents. Moreover, this survey reveals more detailed information behind their interests in rural residency²⁾.

When asked whether they would prefer to move or not move, a larger percentage of urban residents naturally chose to remain at their current residence by a ratio of three to one. However, among those who expressed desire to move to a new location, less than forty percent of those surveyed chose the two categories (areas that are highly convenient and areas with strong rural characteristics) as their desired destinations from multiple choices. In particular, a high percentage of the younger generation expressed desire in living in areas with strong rural characteristics. The percentage of those in their thirties rose to about 45 percent. In

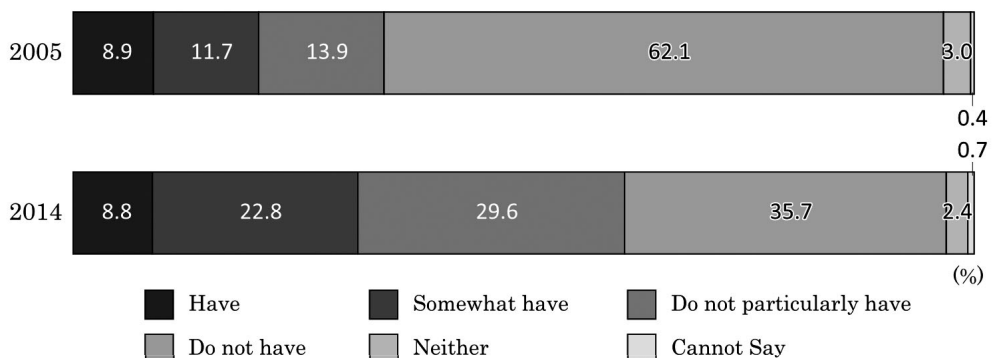


Figure 1. Changes in the Desire of Urban Residents to Live in Rural Areas (2005 and 2014)

Source: “Public Opinion Polls on Rural Areas”

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addition, 31 percent of urban residents responded affirmatively on the question of whether they had any desire to move to the countryside in the future. Interestingly, a higher percentage of the younger generation responded positively to this question: 36 percent were in their thirties, and 38 percent were in their twenties. In addition, over twenty percent of the younger generation chose to move to the countryside “immediately if the conditions are right,” which reveals that rural migration is becoming a realistic option for many people.

It can be summarized that the concept of “return to rural living” indicates a new trend in the movement of population to the countryside, particularly among younger people, and also captures the growing societal interest in the countryside in Japan³⁾.

Return to the countryside

“Homeward I bend my steps. My fields, my gardens, are choked with weeds: should I not go?” (Herbert Allen Giles translation of “Home Again!” 1922)

Coming back to the countryside was nothing special. In early fifth century China, Tao Yuanming fled his unsatisfying job as a bureaucrat, and wrote lightheartedly of traveling to his hometown, where his children and friends awaited him. In his portrayal, the countryside is a place where people are supposed to spend their lives⁴⁾. This was linked to a straightforward yearning for one’s hometown.

Amidst rapid changes in twentieth-century society, the “new village” movement in Taisho-era Japan sought utopia through communal living in the countryside, while Cold War-era hippy counterculture also looked toward the countryside. The idea of “hometown” became abstracted in these movements, but we can easily see them as part of an intellectual genealogy shared with ancient Chinese poets.

Then, is the phenomenon of “return to rural living” simply a repeat of history?

Disappearing Regional Localities and the “Return to Rural Living”

Population decline is one of the major challenges facing Japanese society. Based on the 2015 national census, it is estimated that population decline will accelerate in the future and that the total population will fall below 100 million in forty years. Moreover, there are regional differences in population decline. In 2045, all prefectures besides Tokyo will see a drop in population after 2015 and the decreased amount will exceed twenty percent in seventy percent of cities, towns and villages⁵⁾.

The estimation that the population has become intensely concentrated in Tokyo, which has a low birth rate, is premised on the continuing movement of people from other regions

into the city, which is considered both a global city and the center of Japan’s economy. This is expressed incisively in the proposal named “Disappearing Regional Localities⁶⁾.” The proposal indicates that half of local governments throughout Japan will not be able to survive due to the estimated population decline. This caused a huge sensation across Japanese society when it was reported in 2014.

The usage of the phrases, “return to rural living” and “disappearance of regional localities,” began to be used around the same time, which should not be overlooked as it shows the significance of the policies confronting this issue. The “Grand Design of National Land for 2050” (2014) introduces new trends toward the “return to rural living,” and the White Paper on Food, Agriculture, and Rural Areas for FY2015 also introduces “the return to rural living” along with ideas related to retirement home farming, all in the context of rural revitalization.

The depth of darkness may allow small lights to seem brighter, but it is too simple to conclude that the issue of extinction and the return to rural living were intentionally contrasted by the government. Moreover, the number of population migration to depopulated areas has been gradually decreasing, and returning to rural living does not solve the macroeconomic population issue. Furthermore, if we consider regional revitalization, which is a policy that aims at creating an efficient regional structure for the nation, and the criticism that these policies ignore the issue of regional disparities⁷⁾, we cannot naively praise these policies without hesitation. As scholars concerned with the field of geography, I agree that we should support the practice of “return to rural living” as well as construct a relationship between evidence and the theory that supports it. The symposium held at the Association of Japan Geographers in the fall of 2017 supported these arguments⁸⁾.

Asking Young People

A characteristic of the “return to rural living” is a growing interest among younger generations towards the countryside. Given this, it is necessary to ask young people what they think about this issue. I lecture on rural geography for the entire student body at the school where I work, and gave the following prompt to two hundred of my students: “Give reasons why a growing number of young Japanese say they would like to live in rural areas, and describe what ‘rural’ means.” As my class dealt with the commodification of rural space and multiple functions of agriculture, students came to this question with some knowledge about rural spaces, and their responses do not show great variety.

Many students discussed the contrast between the idyllic image of the countryside and the reality of urban lifestyles. The former involves reminiscing about a homecoming to one’s

grandparents' home in the country, and is also about a connection between humans and nature often depicted in anime. By contrast, the latter involves the stress of urban life, where one is forced to compete for work that grows more and more precarious. Many of them have lived in urban areas since they were born, and thus talked about the countryside as a sort of indeterminate impression, one not grounded in any concrete experience. This impression tends to glorify the countryside through association with concepts such as stillness and compassion for others.

Even more interesting is that several students describe a flattening of the rural and urban areas. “Flattening” has been used in discussions of globalization, and describes a regional averaging out of development opportunities⁹⁾. These students' view is that through public investment in road construction and motorization-led improvements in transit, as well as information technology improvements shown by the spread of the internet and smartphones, basic infrastructure improvements have shrunk the gap between urban and rural life. For these young people, choosing to live in the countryside is no longer such a special thing.

Why move to the countryside?

The government's surveys reveal information about students' understanding of the idea of “return to rural living.”

The survey mentioned at the beginning of this article reveals a variety of reasons for urban residents' interest in rural residency. Nearly half of the respondents expressed interest in living in a “rich natural environment,” 28 percent chose to embrace “LOHAS” or a “Slow life,” and 27 percent chose to avoid “the noise of big cities.” On the other hand, less than 10 percent of the respondents chose to leave in order to start farming.

In a survey of people who actually moved into depopulated rural areas¹⁰⁾, 27 percent responded that their interest in living in the countryside influenced their decision to move. Moreover, among those who moved from urban areas, the rate was 37 percent, and for those who conducted an “I-turn,” or a phenomenon that describes the single-directional movement out of urban areas, the rate was 47 percent. Furthermore, in the question of why they decided to move to their current residence, their responses were ranked in the following order: “rich natural environment” (47 percent), “to change one's workstyle and lifestyle” (30 percent), “to live in silence away from the noise of big cities” (27 percent), “Slowlife” and “outdoor sports” (20 percent). On the other hand, those who chose to leave in order to start farming was only at nine percent (Table 1).

Table 1. Reasons for Choice of Current Residence in Depopulated Areas by In-Migrants

Reasons for moving	Percentage of respondents	Percentage of respondents who are in-migrants from urban areas	Percentage of respondents who are in their thirties
Want to live surrounded by mild climate and rich natural environment	47.4	53.8	48.6
Want to change one’s workstyle or lifestyle	30.3	35.7	32.4
Want to live in silence away from the noise of big cities	27.4	35.0	21.6
Want to live in one’s hometown (birth place)	25.2	26.6	20.3
Want to live with one’s family (spouse, children and parents)	21.9	20.3	23.0
Want to live near one’s family or relatives	21.2	21.7	16.2
Want a lifestyle where one can enjoy hobbies such as outdoor sports	20.1	21.0	20.3
Want to live a LOHAS, Slowlife or self-sufficient life	19.7	21.7	16.2
Want to work or act utilizing their qualifications, knowledge and skills	16.1	16.1	18.9
Want to live in places that are familiar but are not one’s hometown	15.7	17.5	12.2
Want to raise one’s child in a good surrounding full of nature	13.5	11.2	23.0
Want to be able to procure cheaper and more spacious land compared to urban areas	12.8	15.4	10.8
Want to make a new human relationship in a new place	10.9	13.3	12.2
Want a life that has access to cheap, natural and safe food provisions	9.5	9.1	9.5
Seeking employment in jobs such as farming, forestry and fishing, which are not available in urban areas	8.8	9.8	9.5
Became interested in the programs supporting migration by municipalities	8.0	8.4	6.8
Became interested in country life through television, newspapers or magazines.	4.4	5.6	2.7
Others	6.6	4.9	9.5
No answers	1.1	1.4	2.7

Source: “Research report about ‘the return to rural living’” Depopulated Areas Development Office in Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018.

Local governments that saw an increase in urban migrants increased in number by seven percent from 2000 to 2010. In comparison, between 2010 and 2015, there was an increase of 26 percent¹¹⁾. According to Figure 2, there is an obvious increase in the number of migrants to the even more peripheral municipalities of depopulated areas. In other words, the map shows an increase in movement to places that can be best described as “the countryside within the countryside.” While it is possible to interpret this movement from the

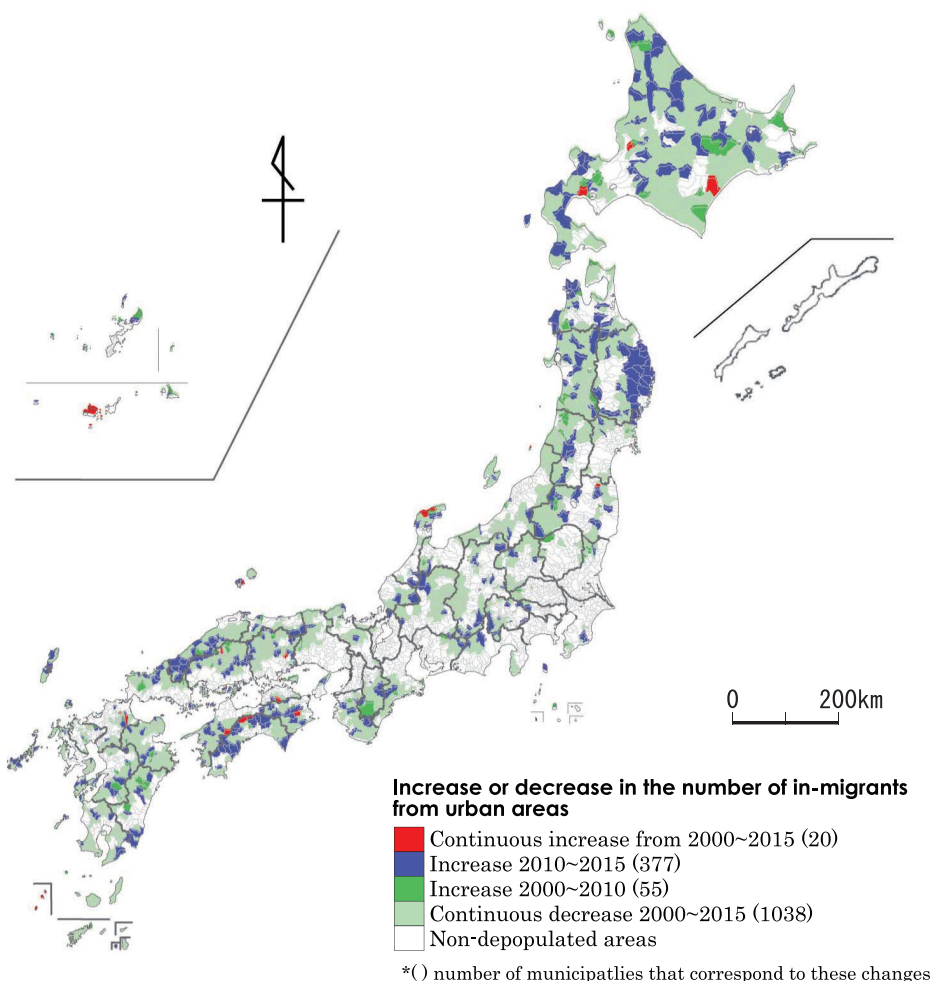


Figure 2. Depopulated Municipalities with Increased Numbers of in-Migrants from Urban Areas

Source: “Research Report on “The Return to Rural Living” (https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000538258.pdf)

perspective of those migrants, it is also necessary to consider the difference in the responses of the host as well as the rural migrants themselves.

As for the latter, the local government’s promotion of the returnee support center as a hub for migrants, the passion of young people at Community Revitalization Aid, and the enthusiasm of the elderly people living in rural communities, are all remarkable.

Relativization of living in the city

“Naniwa was once known as a countryside, but now due to relocation, how like a capital here is!”

This song, which was included in the “Man’yoshu,” was written in the early eighth century by Umakai Fujiwara, who was ordered by his nephew Emperor Shomu to build Naniwa Palace. This was also around the same time when the concept of “*miyabi*” (meaning elegance in Japanese) was born, which was also a time when the admiration of cities began to take place. From this point onwards, the march toward the city and return to the countryside were two sides of the same coin.

Until the eighteenth century when agriculture was the main way of living, most of the population lived in rural areas as sites of production, and only ten percent of the population were concentrated in urban areas. Approximately seventy percent of the population became surrounded by an urban landscape due to industrialization and urbanization in modern times. The rapid urban concentration of the population was linked with the rapid increase in population as well as change in the economic structure (Figure 3). In other words, it can be argued that population growth in the modern era was caused by the increase in the urban population.

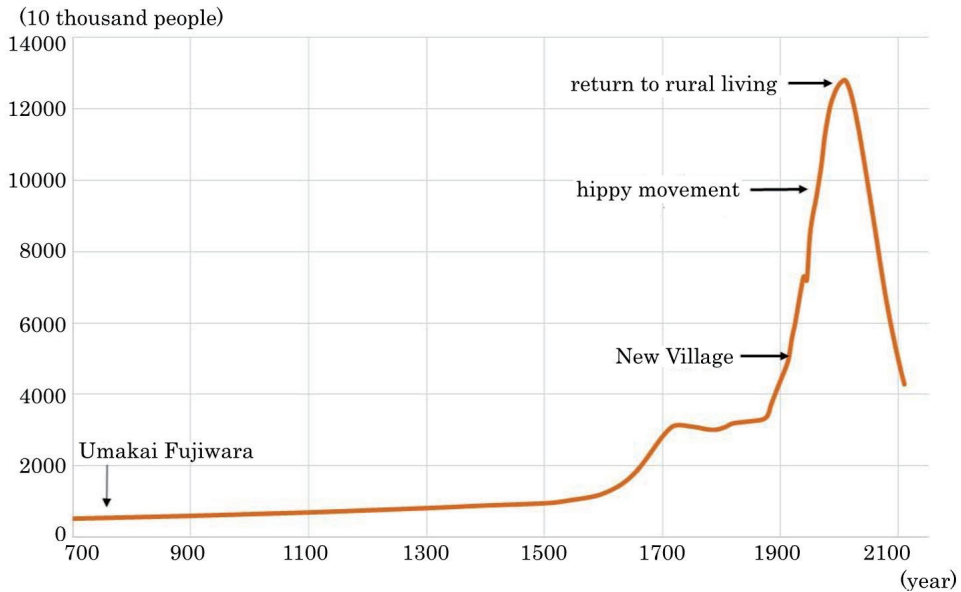


Figure 3. Long-term Fluctuations in Japan’s Total Population

Source: Statistics compiled by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, including the national census, data from the National Land Agency and future population estimates

What are we to make of the simultaneous occurrence of total population decline and a return to rural living? It is natural to believe that this shift would impact the flow of people heading towards the city, a phenomenon that has continued for more than a thousand years and has accelerated in the last hundred years. Young people, full of sensibility, may be beginning to realize what has been incomprehensible to the city-oriented middle-aged and older generations. At any rate, it is clear that young people are beginning to reconsider their choices of residency, and rural communities are starting to accept the younger generation while creating new values.

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【Notes】

- 1) "Public opinion on rural villages." (reports of public opinions in June 2014, Government Public Relations Office) <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-nousan/index.html>
- 2) "Results of survey for urban inhabitants." (distributed at the second workshop on the "return to rural living" by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications on February 6, 2017) http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000464600.pdf
- 3) A series of eight books that considers the multifaceted aspects of the "return to rural living" were published as "Series of Return to Rural Living" (Nobunkyo, 2015-2017).
- 4) "Read Chinese Classics Vol.13 Tao Yuanming" Kadokawa, Tsuru Haruo and Kamatani Takeshi, 1988.
- 5) "Regional Population Projections for Japan: 2015–2045" National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2018.
- 6) "Disappearing Regional Localities" Chukoshinsho, Masuda Hiroya ed, 2014.
- 7) "The Teleology of 'Regional Revitalization'" Nakazawa Takashi, 2016, Annals of the Association of Economic Geographers Volume 62 Issue 4 Pages 285-305.
- 8) "Perspectives on the symposium for Return to Rural Living and geographical theory -Annual Meeting of the Association of Japanese Geographers, Autumn 2017" 2017, E-journal GEO Volume 12 Issue 2 Pages 318-321. Both the symposium and this paper are a part of the research results supported by JSPS Grants-in-Aid for scientific research (16H01963).
- 9) "The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century" Thomas L. Friedman, Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2006. Geographers severely criticize "flattening" caused by globalization, insisting that regional diversity remains important today.
- 10) "Research report about 'the return to rural living'" Depopulated Areas Development Office in Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018.
- 11) 10) cited previously.