The Role of Internal Migration in Sustaining Rural Communities in Japan: The Case of Aso City in Kumamoto

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Abstract

The shrinking of Japan’s rural areas, caused partly by continuous out-migration of younger people to the major cities, is an amply discussed topic in Japanese society and popular media. Even though a certain trend of counter-urbanisation exists despite larger depopulation patterns, many of these migrants do not stay permanently and therefore cannot contribute to sustaining rural areas in the long term. Previous studies argue that considering each community’s characteristics is important in order to find possible ways to sustain rural areas and attract new residents. Therefore, this study focuses on the case of Aso City, aiming to clarify the criteria that makes migration to Aso City appealing or unappealing, and to identify the factors responsible for enabling (or complicating) the act of permanently settling there. In order to do so, the author conducted a survey in Aso City using semi-structured interviews. While the beauty of the natural surroundings, quality of life, and social connectedness are the main positive qualities of Aso City, its infrastructure, demographic development, and economic situation are assessed more negatively by its residents. Further, this study shows that the better a person’s local social connections upon arrival, the more likely they are to find a place to live and work, and stay on a long-term basis. In order to attract new residents to rural areas and support their permanent settlement, it is important to help them obtain the resources necessary for settling and assist their transition into the social structure of the community.

Keywords: rural Japan, internal migration, qualitative research, community sustainability, social connectedness

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Introduction

For several decades, the demography of Japan has been characterised by low fertility rates, resulting in an ageing and—at the same time—declining population, especially in rural areas. This led to a discourse surrounding the sustainability of rural regions, drawing the picture of a noticeably negative future for the people living there.

In his publication in 2014, the former governor of Akita prefecture 秋田県, Masuda Hiroya 増田寛也, predicts the extinction of 896 cities, towns and villages by 2040. This overly negative depiction of the future of rural regions is being countered by sociologists like Tokuno Sadao 徳野貞雄 (2011; 2014; 2015) or Yamashita Yūsuke 山下祐介 (2014; 2015), who stress that the sustainability of any rural community cannot be depicted “top-down” using national census data, but must be evaluated individually, as every community has particular characteristics, problems and possibilities for sustaining itself. Other studies focus on possible ways of sustaining rural communities by reintegrating return-migrants (Fujiyama 2015) or attracting new residents (Ishikawa 2011); however, they fail to question why a person or family would move from cities to the countryside. It seems that migration to urban areas is mostly driven by economic motives (Yamamoto 1997: 209–212), yet while many studies see (return-) migration as a means for repopulating rural communities, it remains unclear as to what would make rural regions attractive for new residents.

This study follows the recommendation of Tokuno and Yamashita, and focuses on one community in a rural area of Japan, aiming to clarify the pros and cons of living in or moving to said community. More precisely, it first determines what marks Aso City 阿蘇市 as attractive or unattractive for its old and new residents; subsequently, it tries to discern what difficulties may appear in the course of (re-)integrating into the local community. This is accomplished by using data from semi-structured interviews the author held with eight re-migrated and thirteen migrated people in Aso City. The focus of these interviews was set on the interviewees’ migration history as well as their experiences after having moved to Aso, and their perception and opinions of their living surroundings.¹

In the following section of this article, I first give an overview of previous research on migration and living conditions in rural areas of Japan. I continue by giving more detailed information about my research site and describing my research method and the data I was able to obtain. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the pros and cons of living in Aso City, as well as discussion of possible problems when (re-)integrating into a local community.

¹ This article is based on the author’s master’s thesis, which can be accessed in the East Asian Studies Library at the University of Vienna (Miserka 2018).
“The End is Nigh” — The Japanese Academic Discourse Surrounding Rural Areas

Most problems faced by rural communities in Japan nowadays are rooted in their loss of the younger population due to out-migration to major cities. This wave of urbanisation started with the onset of Japan’s economic upturn in the second half of the twentieth century. In the years following the end of World War II, the population of Japan began to rise rapidly, especially in rural areas. This overpopulation was “solved” by out-migration by the young generation—excluding heirs and their spouses who were expected to stay and take over family businesses—to urban regions in search of a job (Lützeler 2004: 42).

While the population drain of rural areas had started earlier, it took until the late 1960s for it to be officially recognised. The term kasō chiiki 過疎地域, describing the population loss of a community, making it difficult to sustain everyday life for the people living there (Tsutsumi, Tokuno, and Yamamoto 2008; Yamamoto 2016), was introduced by the Japanese government in 1967 (KSCB 1967: 2). In the following decades, numerous academics dealt with the phenomenon of rural population decline, some pointing out the problems accompanying the shrinking population, and others emphasising the importance of grassroots approaches for sustaining rural communities. In fact, when population loss and the ageing of a community occurs, it can become increasingly difficult to conduct community activities, such as festivals, cleaning of waterways and streets, firefighting, and caring for community property such as forests or grassland. However, while all academics agree that depopulation is problematic, the way they arrive at this conclusion—as well as their suggested countermeasures—differs greatly.

Researchers like Ōno or Masuda mostly draw a rather pessimistic picture of rural areas as well as their future development. Ōno divides rural communities into different categories according to depopulation and ageing, thus trying to define rural hamlets’ experiences of the depopulation process. He points out various associated problems, such as remote hamlets consisting exclusively of elderly people who cannot conduct their everyday business (like grocery shopping or visiting the doctor) without assistance. He also stresses that they lack access to public services (Ōno 2007: 131–138). Masuda uses national population statistics to illustrate the challenges faced by rural areas. He even predicts that 896 municipalities will vanish by 2040. Using the population rate of women of childbearing age (twenty to thirty-nine) as an indicator for the “reproduction power” of a region, he analyses all municipalities that offer available data, and categorises them based upon the likelihood that they will cease to exist in 2040. As possible countermeasures, he recommends the creation of support facilities in the education sector to further childbirth. He also advocates stopping the population outflow to Tōkyō 東京 by making regional cities an attractive alternative for younger generations. Lastly, he states that such countermeasures should be invested primarily
in regions that wield a higher chance of successfully implementing his strategies, thus neglecting the regions most affected by demographic change (Masuda 2014: 11–50).

Masuda’s research attracted considerable attention in both mass media and academia, resulting in a heated debate surrounding the future of rural areas. In particular, his advice to concentrate on “profitable” areas and therefore neglect “weaker” municipalities was criticised heavily (Yamashita 2014). Moreover, the solutions he suggests are said to be based purely on economic and rational thinking and therefore do not take intrinsic solutions that rely more on the independence of municipalities and less on funds from the central government into account (Tokuno 2015: 21).

Some studies, such as those mentioned above, concentrate on the consequences of depopulation for rural areas as a whole and try to come up with general solutions to a problem which different parts of Japan must respond to. Others conduct field research in regions affected by depopulation, depicting the various ways in which local municipalities have tried to cope with their situation (e.g., Matanle and Rausch 2011: 271–312; Thompson 2003: 89–106).

Attempts at attracting private sector investment, infrastructural improvement, or the active encouragement of marriage and childbirth (in the form of marriage brokering or birthing prizes) are just some of the ways in which local administrations have tried to counteract their population loss—and mostly failed. Some municipalities also tried to promote themselves via advertisements in metropolitan areas, organised exchange-meetings in order to entice migrants to return to their hometowns, or provided assistance to newcomers by funding property and settling in periods. However, it is argued that pushing return-migration does not work as people either plan on returning anyway or will never do it, regardless of the enticements (Knight 2003: 115). Furthermore, relying on newcomers carries the risk that most will move away again soon as they find themselves in conflict with the locals or realise they do not enjoy a rural lifestyle (Knight 2003: 112–118).

While it is evident that the above mentioned countermeasures do not succeed in most cases, it is still important that rural areas “do not remain complacent about their position as a one-way supply area of young people to the three largest metropolitan areas,” but instead “take active measures for the future. Even if their populations are in seemingly inevitable overall decline, they should try to limit the extent of this trend and aim to build communities in which people want to live” (Ishikawa 2011: 441). However, this is a difficult task, and finding ways to make rural communities attractive as living places needs a deeper understanding of the living conditions in rural areas.

By trying to discover what characteristics make rural (and urban) areas attractive for residents, Tokuno outlined some central aspects essential for people living in both kinds of localities. He discovered that people living in households in cities while working as employees had obtained a higher education degree and received a higher salary. However, they rented or owned smaller properties with fewer rooms to share,
reported a lower quality of natural surroundings, were less connected within their
neighbourhoods, and received lower social recognition after retiring from their pro-
fessions. People living in households in rural areas who were working at least part-
time as farmers had lower educational attainment and income. However, they owned
bigger properties, had more living space, reported a higher quality of natural surround-
ings, were strongly connected within their neighbourhoods and, due to farming, re-
ceived higher social recognition after reaching retirement and beyond. He therefore
argues that individual achievements, such as education and income which secure the
fundamental economic basis of life, can best be accomplished in urban areas. On the
other hand, regional characteristics, like property size, housing conditions, or the qual-
ity of the natural environment as well as characteristics of social life, such as social
status, social connectedness, or household size, are found to be higher in rural areas
(Tokuno 2011). This observation conforms with the findings of sociologist Yamamoto
Yōzō 山本陽三, who when conducting research in the rural hamlet Yabe 矢部, stated
that it “is not a place to make profit, but a place to live one’s life” and that “farming
is not a labour, but an occupation” (Yamamoto 1981: 24). He suggests that life in (or
migration to) urban regions may be economically motivated, while living in (or mi-
grating to) a rural area is not (Yamamoto 1997; 2017).

If life in rural parts of the country is less favourable from an economic point of
view—a conviction shared for example by Masuda and Ōno—how can these regions
attract new residents and keep them long-term? As shown in Tokuno’s study, regional
characteristics and interpersonal relationships clearly seem superior in smaller, more
remote communities. Thus, it can be assumed that while regional characteristics and
interpersonal relationships encourage people to live in rural regions, economic factors
such as income and education become an obstacle. In order to both attract and keep
their residents, it is therefore essential that the merits of rural life outweigh the demer-
its. By not only offering financial enticements for newcomers but also supporting so-
cial integration into the neighbourhood, communities support economic stability and
provide access to a local support system of mutual help. This social safety net can
make up for the economic downsides of more limited employment markets in rural
areas.

Social integration is not only relevant from an economic point of view, but is es-
pecially important in rural areas where newcomers’ integration is far from automatic,
and they may become subject to ongoing stigmatisation and exclusion by established
residents (Crow and Laidlaw 2019: 569). The longer a family has resided in the same
place, the more established the members will become within the local community. In
rural areas of Japan, where many families have lived for numerous generations and
can trace their ancestry with pride, newcomers have a clear disadvantage. Established
families have created a network of favours and obligations and positioned themselves

2 「矢部は儲けるところではなく、暮らすところだ。農業は労働ではなく仕事だ」.
within the social structure of their community. They have lived in the same place for several generations and thus developed a sense of belonging to as well as “ownership” of the region; they grew up together and therefore share certain norms and values (cf. Elias 1965; McMillan and Chavis 1986). Newcomers, however, are diverse in their place of upbringing; they have no clear position within the local social structure and no favours or obligations binding them to their neighbours. They lack a sense of belonging to the region and one another and often do not share the same norms and values as their neighbours. Due to these factors, newcomers often have difficulties in integrating themselves as equal and permanent members of the local community and consequently move away again in many cases.

This study—using the case of Aso City—aims to include both the grassroots perspective of the characteristics of rural areas of Japan, as well as the difficulties of newcomer integration, in order to find possible solutions for sustaining rural communities.

Aso City as a Case Study

This case study focuses on Aso City, a municipality within the Aso Region in the northeastern part of Kumamoto Prefecture on Kyūshū island in the southwestern part of Japan. Aso City is located in the northern half of the basin of Mount Aso and has approximately 26,200 residents spread out over an area of 376 km² (about seventy people per km²). Rich in natural surroundings, with Mount Aso and the grasslands of the surrounding caldera, its main economic sources are tourism and agriculture. Two major cities can be reached by car in about ninety minutes each—Kumamoto City in the west and Ōita City in the east—and two smaller cities may be reached within about forty minutes in each direction.

Until the Great Kumamoto Earthquake in 2016, the northern part of the basin was connected to Kumamoto and Ōita by train via the Higo-Ōzu Line, and by car via interstate fifty-seven. Due to the collapse of a bridge in the western part of the city, these transport routes have become inaccessible, making commuting to Kumamoto difficult. As a result, the everyday life of Aso City’s citizens has been affected greatly. The number of tourists has plummeted, and out-migration has increased. However, even before these events, parts of Aso City showed dwindling population numbers. While the city as a whole is affected by a slight out-migration and sinking population, it is not—with the exception of the old village Namino-mura—categorised as a marginal municipality (MIAC 2017a: 14). Therefore, Aso City presents a suitable example for an average, rather than extreme, rural municipality.

This study was mainly carried out during August and September 2017 within the Aso City boundaries. The author stayed for three weeks in a central part of the city and visited more remote parts in order to conduct interviews and observe daily life
within the communities. She conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with immigrants (twenty-one people) who either had moved or returned to the municipality from other parts of Japan. In addition, the author stayed for a few weeks in the city in the summers of 2018 and 2019 to reconnect with study participants and collect further impressions of the local situation. The interviews lasted twenty to ninety minutes and were held in an informal setting with one person each (with the exception of Mr. and Ms. Beppu who were interviewed as a pair). No time limit was set regarding when they migrated. The questions were formed on the basis of preceding research on migration and the living environment of rural communities in Japan (cf. Tokuno 2011; Yamamoto and Miserka 2019), as well as research on migration and community studies outside of Japan (cf. Elias 1965; Lee 1966; McMillan and Chavis 1986). The focus was set on the interviewee’s reasons for moving to Aso City, as well as their perception of their living environment and personal relationships to the neighbourhood at the time of arrival in Aso and the time of the interview. First contact was made through mutual acquaintances; the following interviewees were recruited using the snowball principle, resulting in a slight concentration of self-employed entrepreneurs. The gathered data was then transcribed using F4transcript³ and analysed qualitatively without the use of data analysis programmes. Table 1 shows an overview of study participants, their socioeconomic data, and reason(s) for moving to Aso.

| Name          | Sex | Age | Occupation                      | Grew up in Aso? | Places of Residence outside of Aso | Age when moving (back) to Aso | Reason(s) for moving to Aso                                                                 |
|---------------|-----|-----|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Adachi        | m   | 52  | worker at family’s fruit farm   | Yes             | America, Tōkyō, Shanghai          | 42                          | had seen enough of the world, wanted to end up in hometown                               |
| Doi           | f   | 67  | housewife                       | Yes             | Yokohama, Fukuoka, Ōzu            | 57                          | to care for mother, to protect family’s land                                               |
| Ehime         | m   | 37  | owner of small restaurant       | Yes             | Fukuoka, Ōzu, Kumamoto            | 28                          | eldest son and successor, to open own business                                             |
| Fukushima     | m   | 68  | teacher (retired)               | Yes             | Tōkyō                            | 65                          | eldest son and successor, wouldn’t have returned otherwise                                 |
| Okada         | f   | 30  | start-up entrepreneur, farmer    | Yes             | Ōsaka                            | 25                          | to become successor and work the family’s fields                                          |
| Kyoto         | m   | 28  | employee at construction bureau | Yes             | Tōkyō                            | 24                          | had no clear idea what else to do, eldest son and successor                                |

³ F4transcript is a software for transcribing audio data.
| Name   | Gender | Age | Occupation/Industry | Geographical Location | Reason for Moving/Moving to | Additional Information |
|--------|--------|-----|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Sakai  | m      | 74  | miso manufacturer   | Nagoya, Tōkyō, Seattle | Became family and business successor after brother passed away | No additional information |
| Rai    | f      | 40s | guesthouse owner    | Ōsaka                 | Together with mother, to take care of grandparents house | No additional information |
| Bandai | m      | 55  | baker, shop owner   | Fukuoka City          | Nature, water, to open own business | No additional information |
| Goda   | f      | 37  | baker, shop owner   | Saga City (from Fukuoka) | Came on a trip and fell in love with the region | No additional information |
| Ishigawa | m   | 32  | owner of small coffee shop* | Tōkyō (from Ehime) | Water, to open own business, came as volunteer after earthquake 2016 | No additional information |
| Ishigawa | f   | 36  | parttimer at restaurant | Tōkyō | Came together with husband (Mr. Ishigawa) | No additional information |
| Koike  | f      | 42  | farmer              | Tōkyō                 | "Make food with own hands", water, first came on a trip | No additional information |
| Murakami | m  | 40  | owner of small restaurant | Nagoya (from Kikuchi) | To open own business, came on a trip and liked it | No additional information |
| Nakagawa | m  | 40  | shirt manufacturer, shop owner | Kumamoto (from Kobe) | To create fashion brand "made in Aso", was invited by chairman of shopping street association | No additional information |
| Beppu  | m      | 53  | owner of small café | Ōsaka                 | Visited on a trip and liked it | No additional information |
| Beppu  | f      | 53  | owner of small café | Ōsaka                 | Visited on a trip and liked it | No additional information |
| Tochigi | m      | 73  | bank manager (retired) | Nara (from Shimane) | Aso mountain, nature, to retire here | No additional information |
| Chiba  | f      | 62  | ice cream manufacturer, shop owner | Namino** | Namino was too remote, moved to Aso for a better life | No additional information |
| Hori   | f      | 47  | food store employee | Kumamoto City         | Marriage | No additional information |
| Rokuda | f      | 30  | start-up employee   | Ōsaka (from Ōzu)      | Marriage | No additional information |

* The shop has since closed.

** Namino-mura was an autonomous municipality until 2005 when it merged with Aso-machi 阿蘇町 and Ichinomiya-machi 一の宮町 to become Aso City.

Note: The names of all interviewees were changed in order to preserve their privacy.
Aso City from Migrants’ Perspectives—A Qualitative Analysis

In the following analysis, I first focus on Aso’s appeal to its residents (who either migrated or returned to the city). I draw upon Lee’s basic model for migration (1966) which sets the basis for numerous theories regarding migration studies (Poston and Bouvier 2017: 30). While most of these studies deal with international migration, Lee’s model can also be applied to internal migration as it illustrates the basic characteristics of any migration, no matter the distance or borders crossed. It builds on the understanding that the factors influencing any migration can be divided into the following categories: first, personal factors, like the sex or age of a person; second, factors regarding the place of origin, as well as the destination; and third, intervening obstacles which can range from geographic characteristics, like distance, to personal difficulties such as the financial burden of migration (see graph 1).

Lee further states that some factors may influence most humans in the same way, while the individual impact of others differs (1966: 49–50). To give an example, safety (or the lack thereof) has a positive impact on the amenity of a place in general, while good educational facilities may have a positive impact on a family, but significantly less influence on a person without children. It is therefore of vital importance to stress the personal nuances of migration. National census data can give an overview of general migration trends and broad categories for migration motives, like housing or job-related migration. However, they are unable to give a deep understanding of what motivates individuals to move to a certain region or remain there. In order to unravel people’s reasons for moving to the countryside, it is essential to conduct qualitative research and ask people personally why they decided to move there in the first place. Further, it is vital not only to inquire about their motives for moving, but also include the factors that supported or hindered their settlement, like social support within the community on the one hand, and social exclusion or stigmatisation by the established residents on the other (Crow and Laidlaw 2019; Elias 1965).

In the course of this study, I therefore interviewed people who had moved to Aso City and asked them about their reasons for coming to the city, as well as their opinions on their living conditions, surroundings, neighbourhood, and the difficulties they might have experienced in the process of moving. The following analysis is divided into personal factors, regional factors, and possible obstacles involved in migration. As the focus of this study lies with the appeal of Aso City as a destination for migration, and only people moving to the region, not from it, were interviewed, I focus on regional factors regarding Aso City as a destination in part two.
Personal Factors

Personal factors are the characteristics of a person that may influence their ability or intent to move. Age, sex, or dependent family members may count as such factors. There are various ways in which these can impact upon a person’s migration process: in a traditional setting, a person’s sex may determine if they have to move to their spouse’s family home upon marriage, or exert pressure upon them to return to their parents’ home in order to become the family heir. My interviews showed that men had often returned to Aso City in order to take over their families’ businesses or become the successor of the family (Mr. Ehime, Mr. Fukushima, Mr. Kyoto, and Mr. Sakai), while the women more often moved to their spouses’ homes after marriage (Ms. Hori, Ms. Rokuda, and Ms. Chiba). However, not all cases correlated with these traditional gender roles. Ms. Okada, for instance, had returned to her family’s home as the head of the family after her father died. In this case, no other male relative was able to step into the role of successor of the family, so it fell to her to move back and start farming on her family’s land.

Another factor that can be a determining force for migration is age. Migration statistics show that young people in their late teens and early twenties tend to move out of Aso City in order to attain an education or start working in a major city (MIAC 2017b). However, many of them return in the second half of their twenties or early thirties, often to take over as successor or start their own business in the city (MIAC
While (re-)migration in retirement certainly exists within Aso City, no clear trend could be observed, unlike other regions. The results of the interviews also confirm these findings. Most interviewees, both those returning and moving to Aso anew, did so in their twenties or thirties. Some returned to take over a family business (Ms. Doi, Ms. Okada, Mr. Ehime, Mr. Fukushima, Mr. Kyoto, and Mr. Sakai) while others came to start on their own and build something new (Ms. Goda, Ms. Koike, Ms. Beppu, Mr. Bandai, Mr. Ishikawa, Mr. Murakami, Mr. Nakagawa, and Mr. Beppu).

Other important influences on a person’s decision to change their place of residence are marital status and whether they have dependent children or other family members. Of the twenty-one study participants, only five were single at the time of the interview. Another sixteen interviewees were married, eleven of whom also had children. Looking at the time of their migration, it becomes evident that most people moved either when their children were not yet born or after they had grown up. Only two interviewees had decided to move to Aso while their children were small: Mr. Bandai and Ms. Chiba. In both cases, their children had a direct influence on their decision. Ms. Chiba moved to a central part of Aso over thirty years ago when her children were about to start elementary school. Before that, she and her family lived in a remote part of Aso City (which was considered another municipality at that point). It had insufficient infrastructure which made it difficult to sustain their family or let the children commute to school. Mr. Bandai had three children when they moved to Aso. He had wanted to move to Aso for a while but could only make up his mind when his children started going to school:

[…] [W]ell, I thought ‘I don’t want to work in a place like Fukuoka anymore’ and because my second child had just started elementary school I thought ‘now or never’. When the children have reached middle school age, it will be impossible [to move]. ‘That’s impossible’ I thought. ‘I have to do it now or never’.

In most cases, people moved when there were no dependent family members around. However, in Ms. Chiba and Mr. Bandai’s cases, their children played an important role in the decision-making process. In the first case, they moved to a more central part of Aso to lead a more comfortable life, and in the second, they moved to the countryside to increase the family’s quality of life.

Regional Factors

In this section, I delve into the regional factors that may be decisive for migration, and deal with the question of whether living environments are deemed appealing or otherwise. Following analysis of the interviewees’ statements in which they offer their personal opinions about and experiences of Aso as their place of residence, I grouped the topics into two categories depending on whether they had positive or negative connotations.
Regional Aspects Complicating Life in Aso

Infrastructure

Concerning infrastructure and convenience, urban regions offer clear advantages compared to rural areas. Public transportation, jobs, shopping facilities, medical care, and educational facilities are just some of the benefits people living in metropolitan areas usually enjoy. On the other hand, rural areas often lack the basic infrastructure for people to live their everyday lives. Aso City is difficult to describe as a whole, as it is a conglomerate of various older hamlets and towns with the central parts moderately well off and more remote hamlets often lacking basic infrastructure. If one looks at it as one entity, it may seem that all of the basics for everyday life exist—at least to a certain extent. There are shops, cafés, restaurants, and hospitals in different parts of the city; tourism is the main economic force, so employment is not a major problem. In addition, there are several schools ranging from primary school up to a high school located within Aso City, as well as several train stations connecting the city to the regional capitals—at least theoretically. Overall, Aso appears to be a good place to live. However, after spending several weeks in the area and talking to residents, both in the central parts of Aso as well as in the more remote hamlets, I realised that residents experience many problems with regards to infrastructure.

Shopping facilities were the only part of the infrastructure the interviewees were relatively satisfied with. Various large shops and supermarkets are located in the central parts of Aso, providing residents with everything from groceries, clothing, and household supplies to electronics—as long as they have access to a car. Moreover, some interviewees shopped online for both their personal needs as well as their businesses; Mr. Nakagawa, a shirt manufacturer, even sold his own goods online. The only thing the area lacked, according to Mr. Fukushima, was a good bookstore.

All other aspects of the local infrastructure were viewed quite negatively. Transportation had worsened significantly due to the earthquake one year prior to the interviews (in 2016), which is mirrored in the statements of the residents regarding the local transportation system. Most of them mentioned the word kuruma shakai 車社会 (“car society”), and stated that life in rural Japan would not be possible without driving a car:

[The transportation system?] Well, that’s not very good. If you don’t own a car, it’s horrible at least. You can hardly live here with only a bike. Well, I guess that’s the same in all [rural] regions of Japan, it being a car society and all. (Mr. Ishikawa)

Aso’s transportation network has been handicapped significantly since the earthquake of 2016; interstate fifty-seven to Ōzu and Kumamoto, which served as the main transportation route, was destroyed along with the train tracks. At the time of the interviews, transportation was limited to the old “Milk Road,” a narrow winding road
that leads from Ōzu (east of Kumamoto City) up to the edge of the caldera of Mount Aso and then all the way down into the Aso valley. Given that the train service was inaccessible too, everyone with somewhere to go needed to take the slow and dizzying route up the “Milk Road.” As Ms. Goda explains, it can be quite an unpleasant experience: “I try not to drive to Kumamoto, if possible. When I drive through the mountains, my children get sick, so I almost never go there.”

When asked about employment in Aso, some interviewees responded that there were insufficient job opportunities available in the region. However, most replied that there were sufficient job openings if one “weren’t picky.” In fact, there are many job opportunities as temporary workers on farms or part-timers at restaurants and tourist facilities, but regular employment comparable to office jobs in metropolitan areas is indeed rare.

A more severe problem, especially for the younger population, is the lack of educational facilities. There are some elementary, secondary, and high schools within Aso City, but their educational level is viewed as quite low, as Mr. Bandai criticised during his interview. When asked if he wished his children to stay in Aso, he answered:

No, that would probably be impossible and that’s ok. […] First you need a challenge, but in Aso, there are no educational facilities and no work. […] Not that there is none at all, but it depends on what you want to do. That’s why my eldest son is living in a dormitory in Kumamoto. […] There’s one [a high school] here, but the level is low, so if you want to go to university or something afterwards, that’s impossible [here].

At a later point in the interview, when asked about possible insecurities or worries regarding his life in Aso, he again mentioned the educational facilities: “[Worries?] yeah, the education. There’s really nothing left but to go elsewhere. I would really like them to raise the level here and hire suitable teachers.” Other interviewees also mentioned the lack of educational facilities in Aso and talked about the numerous schools that had closed in recent years due to the lack of children of school age.

The quality of medical care seems to be debatable depending on which part of Aso a person lives in and where they lived before. On the one hand, statistics show that various possibilities exist for medical treatment of different kinds in Aso City. There are several larger facilities, like the Ōaso Hospital 大阿蘇病院 and the Onsen Hospital 温泉病院, as well as numerous smaller clinics. On the other hand, opinions regarding the quality of these facilities vary greatly. Ms. Rokuda stated that there is no paediatrician in Aso, while Ms. Goda explained that she conducts all medical business at the Onsen Hospital, including visits to a gynaecologist and paediatrician. Mr. Adachi and Mr. Ishikawa further criticised the lack of medical specialists in Aso and most interviewees travel to Ōzu, Kumamoto or other cities for some of their medical treatment. Only Ms. Goda and Mr. Bandai seemed to be content with the medical care facilities in Aso City.
Putting all infrastructure facets together, interviewees were later asked about the general convenience of Aso as a place to live. Eight people (Mr. Adachi, Mr. Mura-kami, Mr. Nakagawa, Mr. Sakai and Ms. Doi, Ms. Goda, Ms. Ishikawa, and Ms. Okada) perceived their life in Aso as comfortable enough because of its proximity to Kumamoto (Mr. Sakai) and accessibility by car—at least before the earthquake in 2016 (Mr. Nakagawa). Ms. Goda further noted that living in Aso is not impractical for her because she lives near a big supermarket and owns a car. Another nine people said that life in Aso is quite inconvenient, especially for the younger generation, because of its lack of leisure facilities (Mr. Kyoto and Mr. Ehime) and hospitals (Ms. Koike). Four of these people, however, immediately put their statements in perspective. For instance, Mr. Fukushima stated “inconvenient, hmm, yes. But, well, if you just stretch your legs a bit […] of course you can’t do that as much as you become older, but well, as long as you’re fit you can just drive somewhere else.”

Mr. Ishikawa also mentions using the internet for his own convenience: “well, it is inconvenient, isn’t it? But, well, nowadays you have the internet. When I want something, I can just order it [online].” Therefore, even if living in the countryside is inconvenient, technological modernisation means one can be compensated by present-day advancements, like the car or the internet; for some, it has even become something charming, as convenience is often associated with the more negative characteristics of metropolitan areas, such as overcrowding as well as noise and air pollution. Ms. Hori, for instance, mentioned that living in the region was impractical, but that this fact made it such a flourishing tourist site. If Aso had all conveniences big cities had, it would lose its quiet nature, and that would be bad for business. Mr. Bandai offered another interesting point of view in stating that Aso’s charm constitutes its lack of convenience: “hmm, well I came here because it’s impractical. Well, isn’t it just this good exactly because it’s impractical? Haha. At least that’s how I feel.”

Whether a person perceives the impracticality of their surroundings as positive or negative is highly subjective. While Aso’s infrastructure lacks in many areas, this shortage can be overcome by turning to nearby cities or to the internet and, at least in some cases, is perceived as part of Aso’s allure as a place to live.

Living Situation

The living situation in Japan varies greatly between the countryside and any major city. All participants of this study had lived in a major city (population of over 500,000) for at least part of their lives. Cities offer limited living space, yet people in the countryside usually have bigger houses and share them with more family members—often three or more generations live under one roof. Four of the participants were living in a three-generation household (Mr. Adachi, Mr. Kyoto, Ms. Hori, and Ms. Okada), and a further three were living in a four-generation household (Mr. Ehime, Ms. Goda, and Ms. Rokuda). Living together with other generations can become a
challenge and lead to conflicts between the different members of the household. Ms. Rokuda, for instance, said she was very careful in expressing her opinion because she was living with her husband’s family and did not want to offend anyone. Mr. Adachi, living with his brother’s family, also talked about the difficulties he had living with his brother’s wife:

[Problems?] Yeah, there are some. The wife of my younger brother, I didn’t know her very well [before]. That’s why our way of thinking is quite different. When our way of thinking differs, for instance on how to run the business, then it’s only natural that we collide. On that level we have problems.

However, Mr. Bandai, who came to Aso from Fukuoka, stressed the comfort of having additional space available for him and his family:

One difference [to before] is that we have our own property. In Fukuoka there are mostly apartments after all. We had our own house back then, but rarely any garden and I was working to full capacity. […] Here we have our parcel of land and can grow vegetables. Hmm, that’s somehow different. And we can travel by bike and the landscape is really different.

While the housing situation in general seems to be more relaxed and offers more space compared to major cities, the level of comfort differs greatly depending on the people one shares the living space with. Generational conflicts or differences in opinions between the members of a household can impact negatively upon quality of life.

Safety

Another regional factor that has the potential to influence one’s choice is the perceived safety of the living environment. The first association with safety may be (the lack of) crime. However, in the case of Aso City, crime plays only a minor role in residents’ feelings of safety. More predominant are natural disasters which quite regularly affect the area. In spring 2016, an earthquake shook the residents of Aso and destroyed parts of one of their major tourist attractions: the Aso Shrine. In autumn of the same year, the active Mount Aso erupted, ruining the crops of numerous farmers and covering the area with a thin blanket of ash and stones. Ms. Doi remembered that at the time of the eruption, volcanic stones the size of pebbles flew all the way to her hamlet at the eastern edge of Aso City (about eight kilometres linear distance from the volcano).

The nearer someone lives to the edge of the valley, the more often they talk about floods and landslides due to heavy rains. In 2012, such rains caused damage in various areas of Aso City and even claimed several lives. Ms. Doi still has terrifying memories of the flood. During the interview, she showed me a canal bordering her property and told me that it had probably saved her life; it directed water coming from the mountain elsewhere. Afterwards, she showed me the street in front of her house which leads
straight to the mountain and explained that the road had turned into a river, with up-rooted trees shooting down only meters away from her property. When I asked about possible worries regarding her life in Aso at a later point in the interview, she returned to the natural disasters. She said “my biggest worry right now… […] in Aso, when it rains or there’s a weather forecast telling us to be cautious, I get heart palpitations and immediately think I have to run away.”

While natural disasters are clearly an important factor, man-made casualties also have an influence on the perceived safety of an area. Regarding the crime rate in Aso versus “major cities,” Mr. Bandai explained that one of the reasons for lower crime rates in the countryside is because residents are more cautious and sceptical of strangers. Mr. Adachi stated that neighbours in the countryside serve as a kind of crime prevention as they know each other, exchange greetings on a regular basis, and talk with each other when they see someone they think is suspicious. He further adds:

In this neighbourhood, everybody knows everyone. Even if a house is empty, no thief can get in. On the contrary, when I [in my youth] locked the door once, I was scolded by my father, because if there was an earthquake, we wouldn’t be able to get out immediately. […] [Here] the solidarity of the residents is stronger; everybody knows everyone and greets each other. That’s our way of surveillance.

These statements show that crime is seen as a problem in metropolitan areas, while earthquakes and other natural disasters are seen as far more dangerous by Aso residents. Even though the landscape is an attraction for many, the fact that Aso has been struck by several natural disasters has clearly stayed in the minds of its residents.

Future Prospects

I had repeatedly heard about the sad situation of many communities in rural Japan. I was interested in hearing the opinions of people living in such areas since this study is part of the wider discourse on disappearing regions in Japan. Aso as a whole may not be counted as a kaso chiiki, but some hamlets within the municipality, especially at the outer edges of the valley, nevertheless show clear signs of depopulation. Therefore, I asked my study participants about their perceptions of Aso as kaso chiiki and the future prospects of the area. Most participants mentioned the lack of suitable job opportunities and ageing.

Mr. Adachi stated that the biggest problem facing rural areas across Japan was the lack of jobs. As global interconnectedness increases, there are examples of new employment opportunities being created in rural areas, especially in the IT sector. However, as Aso is dominated by tourism and agriculture, he did not envisage any major changes for Aso in the near future. Regarding ageing, he explained that there were lots of children in the area during his childhood in the 1960s, but none lived in his
neighbourhood now. Mr. Ehime added that depopulation was quite a problem, especially in more remote hamlets within Aso City, describing the so called “downward spiral” of rural decline:

In this neighbourhood too there are a lot of vacant houses […]. When [the population] decreases, first the businesses move away, right? […] When shops decrease, then for instance the trains stop coming, the buses, too, stop coming, and the depopulation advances further, and I am concerned about that the most.

On the other hand, Ms. Goda and Hori did not assess the situation quite so pessimistically. Ms. Goda is the mother of three small children and has been living in Aso for eleven years. She told me about the developments during that time: “I think it’s getting better. Hmm, […] there are flourishing businesses and yeah, that’s fine I think. Mmh, in this area [new shops like] Cosmos and so on were built, that’s amazing”. When asked about depopulation within the area, she stated:

Hmm, I think […] at the moment there are quite a few children in this neighbourhood, so I don’t think so. I have three children too, but there are many families who have three children in this area. And three of my friends even have five children, so that’s three families. […] I think that Aso has an unusual number of children.

Ms. Hori shared her positive attitude and said that after a natural disaster (like 2016), there are always setbacks in the economy and population, but if everybody works together, everything would get better again.

Having talked to numerous people in various locations within Aso City, I realised that these differing opinions on Aso’s future prospects are closely linked to the personal history of the speakers. Mr. Adachi, having grown up in a more remote part of Aso in the 1960s, and having only returned a couple of years ago, is confronted by the change in population numbers and age structure. During his absence, a lot changed in his neighbourhood, so his opinions are quite pessimistic. Mr. Ehime too returned to his parents’ home after living in several major cities for a few years. His view is mainly influenced by the rising number of vacant houses in his neighbourhood. Moreover, he owns and runs a fairly new restaurant, and sees himself confronted by rather dim economic prospects due to the diminishing population numbers. As a young mother of three children resident in a central neighbourhood of Aso City, Ms. Goda has a different view. Because of her location and associations with mostly other young parents and their children, her view on Aso’s situation is very positive. For Ms. Hori, having operated a longstanding business for many years, Aso’s future prospects did not depend on the number of children in the neighbourhood, but the number of tourists visiting the area. Since she had witnessed Aso’s economy bounce back after several natural disasters, she did not seem too worried about the future development in the aftermath of the 2016 earthquake.
Regional Aspects Promoting Life in Aso

Living Environment

One of the most important factors for people living in Aso is the landscape and the high quality of the natural environment. No topic was talked about as vividly as the natural surroundings in Aso City. Most interviewees talked extensively about the nature, the rich greenery, and air or water quality. Mr. Bandai recounted his numerous trips to Aso before moving. He came to Aso on a regular basis in order to collect water to take home to his sick father in Fukuoka:

[...] And there was this road up the Tawara mountain, it’s still there, a road that goes up all the way to the top, and I drove up all the way to the top and the view there was amazing. And when going down again there was this grass moving in the light. So beautiful! I thought like ‘Wow, such a place exists?!’

Some residents even grant Mount Aso a personality and develop a personal relationship with it, as Ms. Chiba told me during her interview:

Even if I went somewhere else, this expansive nature only exists here and it brings peace to my soul. Well, the power of the mountain heals the people’s souls, but when there’s a disaster, he appears frightening. This mountain is like a face. When I get up in the morning I open the window and when the weather is nice, he smiles, and when the weather is bad, he looks gloomy and frightening. [...] It’s good to see him every day. Today you can see him clearly, but when there are clouds up there he looks completely dark and such. Like a face. [...] There’s nothing like this in the city. There you are only face to face with people.

This strong connection with Mount Aso was mentioned in numerous conversations. References were made to several legends surrounding the creation of Mount Aso and the Aso valley, and people living there have created a strong bond with it. Ms. Doi, who grew up in Aso and later returned in her late fifties, stresses the charm of Aso’s natural surroundings:

[...] For me this is the place where I grew up and that’s why I love it. The water’s delicious too. Everyday in the evening, I go outside and look at the stars. They change depending on the season. [...] Because it’s dark you can see [them] well. Well, when the street lamps are out you can see them clearly. [...] When I can suddenly see the starry night, it feels like a wonderful present.

However, even though statements praising the rich nature of Aso can be found in almost all conversations with residents of the area, some opinions deviate from the common positive outlook. One such example can be found in Mr. Kyoto, a young man living with his parents after having briefly moved to Tōkyō. He told me he had to return because of his status as family successor but did not like living in Aso. One of the reasons was the natural surroundings. He stated that “the frogs were noisy and
there were too many mosquitos,” and finished by telling me that he would prefer to live anywhere else “as long as it’s not Aso.”

Quality of Life

After talking about the various aspects of life in Aso, I asked my interviewees about their perceptions of the general quality of life in Aso. This very much depends on the individual’s interests and their experience of everyday life. However, most study participants seemed to live a rather fulfilling life, except for Mr. Bandai. He stated that he was content with his life overall but continuously had an excessive workload and long working hours due to running his own bakery. Mr. Adachi, who had returned from working as a salaryman in Tōkyō, compared his former life to his experience in Aso as follows:

Hmm, I came back here after ‘graduating’ from Tōkyō. I’ve had enough of the big city, I like the countryside better. To commute by train every day, wear a suit… [...] Now I get up at five am, but my eyes open naturally, then I have an unhurried breakfast and start my work at eight am. At five pm, I finish already. Then I take a shower and drink a beer. [...] I don’t think anybody in Tōkyō lives such a life. [...] Once, after I had returned here, there was a call from Tōkyō and I told them ‘I am drinking beer and enjoying my free time’, so everybody envied me. Hahaha.

Ms. Goda also prefers her life in Aso to one in a major city: “I don’t like metropolises that well; I cannot handle the hectic pace and noise very well. A relaxed place [suits me better], haha.” Mr. Ishikawa shares her opinion: “compared to metropolises, it’s not as rushed. Everything goes at a slower pace. It’s not that I don’t have anything to do, I have things to do. I am quite busy, but there’s no force, no psychological pressure.” His wife added that since her move to Aso, she stopped “feeling like a robot” all the time.

What caused this improved quality of life? Is it just the relaxed atmosphere or the absence of a hectic urban pace that increased people’s well-being? Ms. Doi attributes her well-being to co-existing with nature and her garden: “since my mother passed away, I live here together with nature and do many things just for me and feel very fulfilled. Even weeding or growing different plants… [...] [I grow] ginkgo, plums, yuzu, kaki, and so on. For me, that’s somehow my purpose in life.” Mr. Bandai and Mr. Ehime enjoy gardening too; Mr. Ehime even uses his homegrown vegetables as ingredients for his restaurant and to try new recipes. However, other approaches to well-being can be found as well, as the examples of Mr. Fukushima and Mr. Tochigi show. Mr. Fukushima returned to Aso after retiring, and Mr. Tochigi decided to build a house there after retiring from his job too. Both men spend most of their free time golfing or enjoying the nearby thermal springs and see their quality of life rooted in indulging in their leisure activities.
Social Connectedness

The last, and probably most important factor influencing a person’s life in rural areas is the social connectedness within the neighbourhood. While the relationship with one’s neighbours is usually of little importance when living in a major city, life in the countryside can become quite difficult if one does not have a working relationship with one’s neighbours. If the relationship between neighbours deteriorates or newcomers fail to integrate themselves into the local community, the dense social network of rural areas can affect everyday life quite negatively. However, if one manages to connect with the neighbourhood, access to the local support system can become a great asset.

All study participants stated that they had a good relationship with their neighbours at the time of the interview. However, they also told me about moving to or returning to Aso City, with some having troubles when first arriving. Some interviewees (Ms. Hori, Ms. Ishikawa, Mr. Adachi, Mr. Ishikawa, and Mr. Nakagawa) stated they had a good relationship with their neighbours from day one, even though they had newly arrived and did not have any prior connection to the area. When asked about whom she could call upon if she had worries, Ms. Ishikawa told me:

Someone to rely on, if I am worried about something? Hmm, the people in this neighbourhood are all quite reliable. I think there would be many who would give me counsel, if I needed some. Until now, I haven’t been really worried about anything yet. […] Even if I don’t have any relatives here, somehow, the people in Aso are very reliable and give good advice on how to tackle things.

Other participants said that they had a good relationship with their neighbours now, but had struggled when they first moved. Mr. Bandai had no family in the area and told me that he had not felt welcome in the beginning:

The people in the countryside are cautious after all: ‘What kind of person might be coming here?’ ‘What’s he like?’ Well, there’s nothing left but to participate in any activities in the hamlet, to give it all in order to be accepted. That’s what I thought back then. Because our children were school-age, there was the children’s group. That’s when all parents in the hamlet get together and that’s how we became integrated quickly.

Mr. Bandai and his family are now well integrated, and have people in the neighbourhood to count on if needed:

At the beginning, he [the neighbour] would bring over various vegetables and such. Now, there’s several things in the neighbourhood [that one has to be cautious about]. Because I didn’t know about these things at the start, he explained them to me. ‘That’s how this works, that’s how that works.’ This way he taught me different things. That, and there are numerous traditions and festivals [here]. In such times, he also helps me out.
Ms. Doi and Mr. Ehime, both return-migrants, showed a little more hesitation when talking about their neighbours. Both had relatives and friends in the area when they returned, but that did not make their social reintegration much easier. While Ms. Doi had friends within the area, she still did not seem to be fully integrated within the local community:

Regarding their way of thinking, I didn’t know what to do. I’m not an outsider but the times are changing, so at first I was watching closely what the others were doing. I saw it and had my own opinion about it. But I didn’t say anything about it because I am still young. There’s a particular way of living in this region after all. That were the conflicts at that time. [...] In the city, you don’t think about such things. You close the front door and are in your own world. In the countryside, everybody knows everyone. That’s why, ehm, for instance, if I don’t sweep the leaves in my garden every day, the people start to meddle. Even weeding I have to give my best.

Mr. Ehime also told me about difficulties when returning to his family’s home. He stated that his neighbours had only recently started to come to his restaurant, which is a sign of acceptance. However, it had taken a long time; he had been home for nine years by then. He also talked about group pressure within the community:

Hmm, Fukuoka was a major city after all, so I was used to that. Here in this extremely small community, different groups are built. There’s the firefighters and the jichitai (self-governing group), also the youth group and, ehm, the group for older people. Many different groups are formed and if you don’t become a member, people talk badly about you. When I returned, I was immediately invited to the firefighter’s [group]. [...] That surprised me. In the end, I joined them because I thought it would be bad if I didn’t. After joining, they were all extremely nice to me, but to people that didn’t join they are exclusive. [...] People from the city are shocked by that.

Ms. Rai also had negative experiences when she first moved to her mother’s family home in Aso. After moving, she hosted a barbeque in her garden, but the first neighbours started complaining about the noise at 7:30 pm because they were farmers and had to get up early. In addition, she stated that after about a month of living in Aso, she had intended to move away again because of the challenges of integration. Now, she has connected with her neighbours and even serves as the head of the neighbourhood association.

Mr. and Ms. Beppu and Mr. Tochigi offer an exception to social connectedness within a neighbourhood. These three people live in the local Daiwa-Resort, a gated community for newcomers without any connection to the community within which it is located. The neighbourhood structure there is much like in a major city; Mr. Tochigi even stated that they had less contact with their neighbours than they had had in the major city where they had lived before. However, Mr. and Ms. Beppu said that they had a good connection with their neighbours in the gated community but none at all with the surrounding community.
Obstacles

Aside from regional or personal factors that may influence migration, obstacles like the lack of financial resources or distance may become a major factor when deciding whether to move to a specific place. The greater the distance between the point of origin and destination, the stronger the incentive to migrate to that specific place has to be (Lee 1966). Therefore, moving long distances generally becomes less likely. To give an example, young people in their late teens and early twenties often move to metropolitan areas to obtain an education or find a job. In such cases, the distance is often quite significant, but the prospect of an education or job is enough to move.

In the case of Aso City, most migrants stem from nearby municipalities, supporting the statement above (KP 2017a). Those who moved to Aso from other prefectures largely came from surrounding prefectures or the Tōkyō metropolitan area, but seldom from the northern parts of Japan (KP 2017b). The participants of this study were mostly either from or had lived for several years in municipalities near Aso, as well as the metropoles on Honshū before (re-)settling in Aso. The fact that most people migrating to Aso come from neighbouring municipalities or prefectures shows that distance does indeed play a role in a person’s decision to move to a certain destination. However, as numerous migrants stem from areas as far away as Tōkyō, this effect is limited. Further, given almost no movement between Aso and municipalities north of the Tōkyō metropolitan area can be observed, a segregation of migration between eastern and western Japan—with Tōkyō as the geographic border—may exist (KP 2017b).

Financial Burden

The financial burden of migration, including moving as well as the usual security deposit, commission fees, and other expenses necessary upon buying or renting a new home, weighs heavy on anyone deciding to move to another municipality, or even another home. However, this burden does not stop with payment to a moving company. Upon arriving at a new place of residence, one first has to gain a stable economic basis for everyday life. Therefore, even after successfully moving to a new place, a lack of financial resources can become an obstacle for successful migration. Some leave during the years following their arrival for economic reasons, as the following example shows.

Mr. and Ms. Ishikawa are a young couple who moved to a remote hamlet within Aso City in 2016, a few months after the earthquake. Mr. Ishikawa had come to the region to help as a volunteer and decided to move there quite spontaneously. As the local spring water is said to be delicious, he started a tiny coffee roasting house in the centre of Aso City, renting the property from another migrant. However, as tourist numbers have been especially low since 2016, his business turned out to be of little
success. To support her husband and in order to be able to afford their everyday life, Ms. Ishikawa started work in a local restaurant as a part-timer during the weekdays while helping her husband during the weekends. Both were concerned about their financial situation, but Ms. Ishikawa seemed more so than her husband. She stated that she would be especially worried if she were to have children; in their current situation, every slight decrease in customers had direct consequences for their everyday lives.

The Ishikawas are fairly well connected: they were warmly welcomed in the neighbourhood as they brought back life to a vacant house, and their coffee roasting business forms part of the local shopping district association. Although they received help and support from both locals and other migrants during the early years, however, their financial problems continued. This became apparent during another field trip to Aso City in 2018: their coffee roasting business was only open during the summer months, when most tourists visit the region. During the winter, the couple worked part-time in restaurants or other shops run by acquaintances, again drawing on their social connections within the community. I learned that their shop had closed permanently during another field trip to the area in the summer of 2019; conversations with acquaintances revealed that they were running a restaurant in Kumamoto City. It is unclear whether they still live in the hamlet within Aso City where they had settled in 2016, but this example nevertheless shows that economic difficulties can hinder permanent settlement within rural areas such as Aso City.

Social Resources

As emphasised above, it is not only important to attract new residents to rural areas, but to support newcomers’ transitions. By becoming members of the local community, migrants become long-term additions to the local population. This transition, however, is a complex process that is affected by a variety of circumstances. Local social resources available to individuals at the time of migration—such as family or acquaintances who may help in finding a job or act as guarantor for renting a home—vary greatly and depend upon previously established connections to their new place of residence. On the one hand, people who return to their hometown are usually able to rely on their status as residents since childhood as well as resources provided by their families or friends—their social resources. On the other hand, those who choose to migrate to an unfamiliar region or community usually have limited access to such help.

These differences became apparent during several interviews. The migrants recalled moving to Aso City and elaborated on the problems faced and situations coped with. In the following examples, I outline contrary experiences.

One of the most prevalent interests among newcomers appears to be obtaining farmland for cultivation. As a return-migrant, this hardly posed a problem for Ms. Okada. She had moved to Osaka at the age of eighteen to pursue an education and later worked as a product designer. Upon the death of her father, she returned to her
family home at the age of twenty-five to take over her family’s property. With only a younger sister and no brothers, she is the sole successor and is thus expected to take care of her family. Ms. Okada explained that she had decided to move back home after the floods of 2012. These caused her to worry about her family, and to cultivate the family’s fields as there was no one else to do so.

Ms. Okada combined her knowledge and skills as a product designer with her family’s resources to create a new product—a kind of mustard using local ingredients. She did not return to her hometown because it was her desire to become a farmer (and start-up entrepreneur), but moved out of family responsibility. She then established her current career because she wanted to use the resources available to her through her family. Further, she claimed to have a good social relationship with her neighbourhood and the local community for two reasons: first, she has access to the connections established by her family; and second, membership of a local start-up association enables her to exchange experiences with other (young) entrepreneurs who share a similar background. From the beginning, her family’s farmland as well as their social connections within the neighbourhood aided her transition into the local community. Ms. Okada’s network of entrepreneurs now enables her to share and receive important information regarding her business, thus further strengthening her personal connection to the area.

Another interviewee, Ms. Koike, is an example of a person who moved to Aso City as a newcomer. She grew up in Tōkyō where she had worked in her family’s hairdressing business. She and her husband—both interested in a more “natural” way of life—decided to move to the countryside at the age of thirty-six in order to become farmers and “grow food with their own hands.” They settled down in Namino-mura, a remote part of Aso City, after visiting on a trip. Moving, however, was not without problems. Ms. Koike stated that upon their arrival, she did not feel welcome. They had difficulties renting farmland as they did not know any of the residents and were not trusted at first. She explained that they had to earn the locals’ trust gradually by helping out on other farmers’ properties to become accepted and finally be allowed to rent land of their own.

In the case of Ms. Koike and her family, the desire to move to the region and become farmers came first, but they had to work hard to obtain the necessary resources to realise their ambition. Today, they are part of their neighbourhood, participating in community activities like the fire brigade or maintaining the neighbourhood (by cutting grass etc.), but their transition into the community was a lengthy process.

When buying or renting a building for business or as a place to live, it is essential to have good connections within the community. In the case of Mr. Ehime, obtaining such property was easy. He had moved away at the age of eighteen to undertake an apprenticeship at a restaurant and continued to work as a chef in Fukuoka, Kumamoto, and nearby towns to gain experience. He had always intended to return home and build a business in his hometown, because he “is the eldest son and as such had always
known he would have to move home eventually.” He did so at the age of twenty-eight and used an old barn on his family’s property to build a restaurant which he now runs together with his wife.

Mr. Ehime was able to draw on his family’s resources in order to open his own restaurant but nonetheless had difficulties reintegrating into the local community. Upon his return, he found it hard to reintegrate into the tight-knit neighbourhood—especially the obligations of joining local activities—and claimed it had taken his neighbours about nine years to finally accept him back into the fold. He is now part of his local community but seems to enjoy his relationships with other regional entrepreneurs more. He is also part of Ms. Okada’s local start-up association and friends with other (re)migrants in the area. His decision to return home was greatly motivated by his responsibility as the first son, and he was able to combine his family’s resources with his skill as a chef to fulfil his dream of becoming a restaurant owner.

Mr. Bandai, on the other hand, had wholly different experiences before and upon his arrival in the region. He moved to Aso City at the age of forty-seven, did not have any social connections within the area, and thus faced serious challenges achieving his goal of living there. He grew up in Fukuoka where he had lived and worked as a baker. He started to think about moving to the Aso region when his father became unwell, seeking a healthier environment for his wife and children. The Aso region is famous for its healthy and clear spring water; many people travel there in order to collect fresh water to bring home to their families. Mr. Bandai did so, gradually falling in love with the region. At first—about fifteen years earlier—he had wanted to move to another part of the Aso region but was unable to obtain a business property or even a place to live because there were no empty houses. Even if there were any, they would not be rented out to him. He therefore gave up and returned to Fukuoka. However, when his second child was about to enter elementary school, he thought he had to move then or never. He started searching in other parts of the region and finally found a house to buy where he has lived since.

Mr. Bandai did not feel welcome but did not think much of it because “people in the countryside are cautious of newcomers.” He stated that he participated in local activities as much as possible in order to become accepted by his neighbours. Nowadays, he regards himself as well integrated in the local community; he is part of the local michi no eki 道の駅 (a roadside station selling regional specialties) and a member of the Parent-Teacher Association at the school attended by his children. This example clearly shows how a lack of social connections in a region can become a major hindrance when moving. His strong desire and willingness to participate in local activities ultimately enabled him to migrate to his place of choice and become a part of the local community.
Conclusion

Based on Tokuno and Yamamoto’s research, I presumed that individual achievements, such as higher education and income, could best be accomplished in urban areas, while property size, housing conditions, the quality of the natural environment, as well as social characteristics such as social status, social connectedness, or household size may contribute to a higher degree of personal well-being in rural areas. My analysis shows that Aso City’s most important qualities when attracting returning and new residents are its natural surroundings, good water quality, social connectedness, and slow-paced rhythm compared to life in a major city. These factors seem to enhance the quality of life for people living in the area, whereas infrastructure—like job opportunities, transportation, educational facilities, or the current economic situation—are rated lower by residents, and thus make life in Aso City rather unattractive. These observations therefore support the assessment that rural regions are rich in natural and social resources, whereas urban regions offer better economic conditions.

While the infrastructure and economy in Aso are not as well developed as in most major cities, the natural environment and social connectedness seem to compensate. Local community life is the basis for mutual help among neighbours and acquaintances. Offering help in finding a new job, providing space to open a business, or lending each other a hand with everyday tasks are just some of the ways in which participants of this study supported their neighbours or in turn were provided with. While regional factors like rich nature and a stress-free environment play a vital role in attracting people to the countryside, the social connectedness of the residents is a major factor when helping them to settle in and adjust. It therefore makes sense for Aso City to rely on its natural surroundings and the strength of local communities in order to attract new residents. The positive factors, especially the natural environment, are specific to Aso City or the Aso region; communities in other regions of Japan may have entirely different characteristics. Consequently, this study strongly supports the position of Tokuno and Yamashita and advocates for the adoption of a grassroots-approach to community sustainability in which the local level is examined instead of national solutions.

The current economic situation is quite flat due to the earthquake and eruption of Mount Aso in 2016, both of which dampened tourist numbers. It can be assumed, however, that the region will experience an economic upturn once transport connections to Kumamoto City (via a newly built tunnel connecting the two cities which is scheduled for completion in 2020) are rebuilt. It is not unlikely that Ms. Hori’s prognosis about Aso always bouncing back after a natural disaster may in fact turn out to be correct.

As shown above, resources—in the form of social connections—are an integral factor for successful migration to Aso City. This outcome can also be derived from
the thesis of Elias who explained the inner workings of closed communities (the “established”), and what may happen if they are confronted with newcomers (the “outsiders”) (Elias 1965). In Aso City, having family or friends in the region is important in order to obtain property and gain trust within the local community. People returning home have an easier start upon arrival as they can rely on their family’s support. However, they often move back because of external circumstances, such as being the successor to their family (Mr. Kyoto, Mr. Fukushima, and Mr. Sakai). Therefore, they are sometimes not as enthusiastic about engaging in their surroundings as those who move to a certain area explicitly because they wish to do so.

In order to sustain rural communities, it is important for both kinds of migrants to engage actively in the community. Return-migrants have stronger connections to the region, having lived or grown up there, whereas newcomers have the potential to enrich the community by offering new points of views. Both are equally important for the continuity of rural areas. To not only attract new residents, but to ensure that they stay and are active as equal members of the community, it is vital to integrate them via social relationships. Mr. Ehime’s statements regarding the neighbourhood groups and his neighbours’ attitudes towards members and non-members respectively underline the importance of participation in such group activities. Meanwhile, Mr. Bandai’s story shows that continuous engagement in neighbourhood activities helps one to find a place within the community. If established and new residents manage to create a supportive and equitable community, even economic difficulties, such as those of Mr. and Ms. Ishikawa, may be overcome eventually. Therefore, the importance of social connections within a community has to be stressed.

As this study only deals with Aso City, its results can only be applied to other rural communities to a limited extent. Due to the limitation in the number of interviews and observations, further research has to be conducted regarding social connections and the inner workings of local communities in order to find possible solutions for (re)integrating residents and sustaining remote communities in other areas of Japan. Further, it would be interesting to include people who wanted to migrate to the region but did not manage to do so (e.g., because of financial matters), or those who did migrate but moved to another municipality shortly afterwards (e.g., due to a lack of resources or social relationships in their new place of residence).

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GLOSSARY

Akita-ken 秋田県 Akita prefecture
Aso-chihō 阿蘇地方 Aso region
Aso-machi 阿蘇町 Aso City
Aso-shi 阿蘇市 (old) Aso-town
Higo-Ōzu honsen 肥後大津本線 Higo-Ōzu Line
Ichinomiya-machi 一の宮町 (old) Ichinomiya town
jichitai 自治体 self-governing body
kaso chiiki 過疎地域 depopulated regions
Kumamoto-ken 熊本県 Kumamoto prefecture
Kumamoto-shi 熊本市 Kumamoto City
kuruma shakai 車社会 car society
Kyūshū island
Masuda Hiroya 増田寛也 Masuda Hiroya
michi no eki 道の駅 roadside station selling regional specialties
Namino-mura 波野村 Namino village
Ōaso byōin 大阿蘇病院 Ōaso hospital
Ōita-shi 大分市 Ōita City
onsen byōin 温泉病院 Onsen Hospital
Tokuno Sadao 徳野貞雄 Tokuno Sadao
Tōkyō 東京 Tōkyō
Yabe 矢部 Yabe
Yamamoto Yōzō 山本陽三 Yamamoto Yōzō
Yamashita Yūsuke 山下祐介 Yamashita Yūsuke