

Intranational Migration Trends in The Japanese Countryside and Government Programs Aimed at Rural Revival

As a result of the rapid economic development of post war Japan, the so called “land of the rising sun” has seen explosive urbanization in the past 70 years. The proportion of people living in urban areas grew from 63% to 92% between 1960 and 2022 (“Urban Population - Japan | Data”). It is without surprise, therefore, that the population of smaller towns has diminished in recent years; with some places becoming completely abandoned. People remaining in these towns are almost always the elderly, which leads to issues in terms of being able to provide for the elderly in the community and what to do with their houses once they die. These abandoned homes (Akiya) have become the center of initiatives by the government and the municipalities in question to attract people back to these communities. The abandonment of these communities carries a serious risk of the extinction of the local culture; therefore, it is crucial that these communities attract young workers to safeguard their way of life. This article will attempt to explain the steps that these governments are taking to make their communities more attractive to young workers. These include providing cheap land, subsidies, and services to make the transition to the countryside more accessible(シニア世代の暮らしの手帖). As well as introducing private sector solutions to the issue.

With the demand for Akiya and land in rural areas being low, the governments of local towns have begun to sell them for extremely low prices. This has proven to attract many young

migrants to these areas who want more space to start a family but cannot afford homes in urban areas. While the average cost of a second-hand home in the Tokyo metropolitan area is 30 million yen, in the countryside Akiya can be bought for as little as 500,000 yen; and while these Akiya need renovations, the final cost to homeowners is much less compared to buying a second-hand home in the city (Teh). Aside from the low price, houses found in the countryside are much larger than their city dwelling counterparts. With space for a garden and parking as well, there are many attractive aspects to moving to the countryside. This does not come without its downsides, however, as Akiya are usually traditional style homes that young people are not particularly eager to live in.

On top of the affordable homes available, the Japanese government has begun to provide a grant of 1 million yen to people who move from an urban city to the countryside. For people who buy an Akiya and remodel, another 1-million-yen worth of points that can be exchanged for household appliances is also offered if the home is certified as energy-efficient (“Buy a House in the Japanese Countryside and Get up to ¥1 Million Yen in Points from the Gov’t and Other 2021 Home Buyer Incentives - Blog”). There are also incentives for entrepreneurs. For example, a grant of up to 3 million yen for people who set up a new information technology business in the countryside. Local governments also provide support by helping new residents set up businesses or find employment. These programs help new residents to thrive in their new environment and benefits the community (“Get Paid by the Japanese Government to Move to the Countryside”).

Aside from economic incentives, many Japanese people are turning away from a concrete dominated urban lifestyle and embracing living with nature. Japan is notorious for having a work-first ethic and employees regularly work overtime. Employees frequently work two or more hours of overtime per workday, often unpaid. This is exactly what led Haru-san, a 45-year-

old man who worked in IT in Tokyo, to move to Niigata prefecture in pursuit of a healthier lifestyle. After 17 years of being stressed and overworked in the IT sector, Haru-san moved to the countryside of Niigata where he opened his own guest house 'The Guild house Tokamachi'. There he lives a simple life, using the income he receives from the guest house to sustain himself. He doesn't even own a car, seen as a necessity in rural Japan, as he is able to rely on others when he needs to go somewhere. As a result, he rarely leaves the guest house and interacts mostly with the residents. His diet has also changed from convenience store food to locally grown vegetables. This lifestyle has allowed Haru-san to improve his mental and physical health. There are many people like Haru-san who have grown tired of the overwhelming culture of large cities such as Tokyo and move to the countryside. These urban migrants represent a larger trend in Japanese society to prioritize small scale happiness over material possessions and to focus on oneself rather than loyalty to a company. Like Haru-san, these changes in thinking have driven many young Japanese people to move to the countryside for a more personalized lifestyle. This is one of the many factors driving this kind of intranational migration.

Another factor driving migration to the countryside is the desire for couples who live in small city apartments to start families. Japan is facing a population crisis whereby year after year less children are being born due to the lifestyle pressures caused by urbanization as well as economic stagnation. Apartments in Japanese cities are very small, usually around 65 square meters. This is just enough space for one or two people and makes starting a family for couples living in the city challenging at best and impractical at worst. These conditions drive young couples to move to the countryside where they can raise children in a more comfortable environment. Rural towns have begun to offer low-cost childcare and other monetary incentives

for having children. These incentives have proven effective in encouraging young couples to relocate to the countryside.

Aside from the government, the private sector is offering its own solution to the Akiya problem. There are several companies managing Akiya that remodel and lease them to individuals. This method mitigates risk for an individual moving into the Akiya and stimulates the economy by encouraging people to rent Akiya. These initiatives have also been successful and have birthed a new industry of remodeling and managing Akiya.

The private sector has another role to play in encouraging urban migration; work from home (WFH). WFH gained large traction during the global Covid-19 pandemic and forced many companies to allow employees to work remotely. The unintended consequence of this was that it was clear that employees can maintain the same productivity while working from home. However, due to Japanese society and business placing a high value on face-to-face interactions and frequent hospitality visits to clients. The WFH model has not caught on as much as in the western world. For example, in the United States many people have become remote only employees and will refuse a job that requires them to commute to the office. Perhaps in the coming decades WFH in Japan can become mainstream, allowing workers to live anywhere they like.

The effectiveness of the abovementioned initiatives has been qualitatively observed by researchers. It appears that there is a migration pattern from large cities to rural areas, particularly the Touhoku region. There is a shift in where people are deciding to live and work. However, it remains to be seen if this trend continues (“Back to the Future – a Case of Japanese Rural Migration”).

There is also an alternative option for people tired of big city life but not willing to make the adjustments necessary for rural life. There are several medium-sized cities that have been making moves to attract young people. Notable among these is Fukuoka. The government of Fukuoka has been working towards creating a more friendly environment where people can have the conveniences of modern life but still live without the chaos of Tokyo. The city is known to be very easy to live in and close to nature. They have also been making moves to attract business and entrepreneurs by cutting corporate taxes and setting up special visas for foreign investors. They are also providing consulting services for business, legal, and financial matters to entrepreneurs. As a result of these efforts Fukuoka has seen a new business growth rate of 7% and these businesses have raised a total of over 7.1 billion yen. With the influx of new foreign and domestic investment the number of Jobs has also increased significantly. Fukuoka has become the start-up capital of Japan and hopes to rival Tokyo in terms of economic power. Their goal is to create a “unicorn”, a company valued at over 1 billion USD (Gent).

Overall, Japan is starting to see a reverse in the urbanization trend with intranational migration of young people to the countryside. This is brought on by various factors, including government incentives, economic factors, changing societal attitudes, changing work structures, and unique business opportunities. And while these have proven to convince some people to relocate, there are still many challenges to overcome. Going forward Japan will need to continue to invest in these small communities to make them places that young people want to live in. Furthermore, Japanese society will also need to reevaluate how business and work is conducted to allow people more flexibility in their lifestyles and at the same time work to allay many societal issues brought on by hyper urbanization. Hopefully this trend will continue, and Japan

will become a place where people have the freedom to live where they like without having to give up their lifestyles or careers.

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