

**Wolfram Manzenreiter, Ralph Lützel, and Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, eds.,**  
***Japan's New Ruralities: Coping with Decline in the Periphery***

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On the cover of this edited volume, readers see a lady stretching her hands against the sky, framed by the strikingly green rice paddy and trees in the background. This image could be seen as a visual expression of the key aim of the book to “challenge negative perceptions within Japanese media and politics on the future of the countryside” (i).

Consisting of fifteen chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue, this collection focuses on “asymmetries of power to explore regional autonomy and heteronomy” (i). The volume is organized into four sections: “Transformations in the Primary Sector,” “Political Innovations in Rural Japan,” “New Residents in the Countryside,” and “Conceptual Interventions for a New Understanding of Rural Japan.” Authors from Europe, the United States, and Japan with expertise in various disciplines—including political science, anthropology, human geography, and sociology—have contributed heterogeneous perspectives to this volume. Many of these chapters dissect the relationship between the countryside and peripherality. The editors’ interest “in how the concepts of the

global countryside and peripheralization together might enhance our understanding of the changing countryside in Japan” (295) sounds riveting. Analyzing marginalized rural areas in Japan and elsewhere as an interplay of local actors and global forces seems long overdue. The editors draw on Michael Woods’s concept of the “global countryside” (Woods 2007, 497) that fleshes out “the ways in which local actors engage with global networks and global forces to produce hybrid outcomes” (8). Peripheralization

means that specific areas, most but not all of them rural, are being disconnected from economic and social development because of their dependence on political and economic decisions made in the centers of power, i.e. where central political institutions and corporation headquarters are located. (3)

In theoretical terms, the editors importantly contest the ingrained fetishism with structuralism in previous research of rurality:

In order to come to terms with the rural in Japan, this volume therefore seeks to find a middle ground by paying attention both to structure *and* agency, which leaves space and opportunities for autonomous action—and by accentuating the multi-level nature and process-driven character of transformation, arguably more pronounced in the global countryside discourse. (12)

In chapter 2, Paul Hansen compellingly examines human-animal relations in dairy farming and deer hunting on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research, Hansen proposes assemblage theory to comparisons of place and practice “wherein heterogeneous and retractable components, human and non-human, come together retaining their individuated historical identities while making emergent properties beyond themselves” (44).

Chapter 3 offers an empirically sound analysis by Kiyohiko Sakamoto and Haruhiko Iba on the impact of neoliberal market structures on traditional agricultural practices in Western Japan. This chapter provides an informative outline of recent transformations of Japan’s agricultural sector against the background of aging and depopulation, for example, the increasing “de-ruralization” of community members as a result of growing reliance on non-farm sources of income (52).

In chapter 4, Johannes Wilhelm portrays the intricate relationship between local and global elements in the sea squirt cultivation industry in northeastern Japan as he examines the impact of an import ban on marine products from Japan imposed by South Korea in 2014. Thereafter, Sonja Ganseforth depicts the decline and diversification of Japan’s rapidly aging coastal fisheries in the Saga Genkai area in southern Japan in chapter 5. Echoing Hansen’s proposal in chapter 2, she observes that “examining these contact zones as more-than-human assemblages . . . could be a promising change of perspective for future analyses” (96). Ganseforth’s interviews of local family businesses in coastal fisheries powerfully illustrate the pertinence of Woods’s “global countryside” as local stakeholders face the double burden of demographic decline and increasing competition and pressures to merge due to the global market.

The second section examines a range of grassroots transformations and reforms as a viable option to top-down restructuring. In chapter 6, Thomas Feldhoff and Daniel Kremers analyze the potential of energy transformation based on renewable energies. Their chapter vividly illustrates the gap between the necessary challenges that the energy sector faces and the constraints of the local governments in Japan that “are

not in a position to create the infrastructures, institutions and practices necessary for decentralization independently” (117).

Chapter 7, “Empowering Rural Cooperation: Effects of Agricultural Policy Intervention on Rural Social Capital” by Shinya Ueno, Toshiki Osuga, and Wolfram Manzenreiter, examines the impact of land improvement policies on social capital in rural Japan. Opting for a longitudinal comparison of data from a nationwide survey on rural social capital in 2006 and 2016, the authors observe a general decline in social capital. However, their findings suggest that among smaller communities, participation in irrigation, road maintenance, and arable land improvement politics reduces the loss of social capital. A mixed-methods approach including qualitative methods could have refined the findings derived from the governmental survey data as interpretations of social capital may vary individually.

Chapter 8, “Sustaining Healthcare in Japan’s Regions: The Introduction of Telehealth Networks” by Susanne Bruksch, analyzes the introduction of telehealth networks in the remote regions of Fukui and Nagano Prefecture, which are grappling with depopulation and aging. She argues that “the decentralized structure of telehealth networks in Japan counteracts an increase in dependence on medical institutions and government health authorities located in the metropolitan centers” (154).

Chapter 9, “Regional Revitalization as a Contested Arena: Promoting Wine Tourism in Yamanashi” by Hanno Jentzsch, discusses the interplay of the respective interests by local stakeholders in governmental attempts to implement regional revitalization. Jentzsch’s observations about the constraints imposed on local stakeholders share common features with the chapter by Feldhoff and Kremers about the limitations faced by local governments, if in a somewhat different context:

the local stakeholders in Kōshū City still perceive the postwar hierarchical order of central-local relations as a political reality—yet with the major differences that central funding is now harder to obtain than before, and the task at hand has become much harder due to lasting socioeconomic decline. (171)

Part 3 explores the role of new residents in the countryside. In chapter 10, “Has the Island Lure Reached Japan? Remote Islands between Tourism Boom, New Residents, and Fatal Depopulation,” Carolin Funck dissects how some islands in Japan aim to capitalize on “back to the countryside” movements to evade looming depopulation and aging. Funck aptly points out that population data need to be taken with a grain of salt, since many residents leave their registration records unchanged even if they have, in fact, moved elsewhere (181). Data from an online survey conducted in 2017 indicates that islands attract visitors as exotic places to spend some time but have less pull as long-term places of residence. Nevertheless, emerging art tourism on remote islands in the Setouchi Sea in southern Japan has attracted some newcomers. Reflecting on the socioeconomic aspects of remote islands, Funck concludes that “migration has become visible, but it has not turned the tide nationwide” (193). Yet, she concludes her chapter by observing that for some localities, the influx of new residents can impact the discourse on peripheralization.

Chapter 11, by Shunsuke Takeda, explores how lifestyle migration and social movements relate to the preservation of traditional ways of life on Iwaishima, an island that has attracted lifestyle migrants who are members of the anti-nuclear movement. Takeda’s interlocutors confirm Funck’s observations about the limited attractiveness of

remote islands as they list limited employment opportunities as challenges in Iwaishima. However, narratives suggest that community ties and networks with other non-locals may facilitate newcomers' financial conditions. Takeda's chapter provides a nuanced analysis of the entanglement with and transcendence of in-migrants beyond their newly chosen places of residence.

In chapter 12, "*Nai mono ha nai: Challenging and Subverting Rural Peripheralization? Decline and Revival in a Remote Island Town*," Ludgera Lewerich discusses the revitalization strategies employed by the local government of Ama Town located on a remote island in Western Japan. Lewerich's observation about the dilemma local governments face as being responsible yet incapable of acting independently ties in with Feldhoff and Kremers as well as Jentzsch.

Chapter 13, "Embracing the Periphery: Urbanites' Motivations for Relocating to Rural Japan" by Cornelia Reiher, examines the feasibility of wider "de-peripheralization" of remote areas in regional revitalization when appropriating government programs to their own needs but also recognizes its limitations (242). Like Lewerich, Reiher argues that attempts toward increased agency in local governments concur with systemic constraints. Given these persistent hurdles that keep local governments and individual actors from implementing their visions, the key question that remains to be answered is what successful revitalization actually is. All chapters of this section (and some others) unsurprisingly conclude that demographic trends cannot be reversed. With increasing aging and depopulation, a clear definition of what rural revitalization could look like would make sense. Terms like "exchange population" (*kōryū jinkō*) instead of "permanent population" (*teijū jinkō*) have recently gained ground and confirm the more dynamic understanding of rurality as fluid rather than spatial determinism.

The fourth and final section deals with the matters suggested in its title: "Conceptual Interventions for a New Understanding of Rural Japan." Chapter 14, "Reinventing Rurality: Hybridity and Socio-Spatial Depolarization in Northern Japan" by John Traphagan, depicts the emergence of hybrid spaces in rural Japan that comprise both tradition and modernity, rustic and cosmopolitan features. The case of a successful gelato shop "at the end of the universe" (252) illustrates the relativity of spatial periphery, as strategic usage of the rustic may indeed enable global cultural flows. Traphagan manages "to bring the issue of socio-spatial depolarization of periphery and center down to the level of the individual" (258) as he highlights how individual entrepreneurs draw on their diverse urban experiences to reshape the rustic rural into a cosmopolitan arena that combines local produce with an international touch.

Tolga Özsen's chapter, "Rereading the Changing Japanese Rural Peripheries: New Approaches and Actors for the Future," presents a thought-provoking portrait of socioeconomic relations between parents living in rural areas and their offspring who have out-migrated to nearby cities. This chapter questions the common assumption of better economic conditions in urban areas. Discussing Tokuno's (2010) "settlement analysis method," Özsen proposes to approach rurality as a notion that transcends spatial boundaries and emphasizes relationships and networks instead.

In the final chapter, "Environmental Activity Gaps and How to Fill Them: Rural Depopulation and Wildlife Encroachment in Japan," John Knight examines the pressing issue of increased wildlife activity and plant growth in depopulated rural Japan as a form of peripheralization (276).

After reading these chapters, I am not quite convinced by the approach of tackling the notion of rurality with the combined notions of peripherality and the global. What exactly is the added value of applying both of these paradigms together, especially with regard to structure and agency? What is peripherality after all? What about the authors' role in producing and representing peripherality? While both tropes are enticing per se, the set of papers does not seem to work as a coherent entity.

The strength of the book lies in the comprehensive coverage of an impressively diverse range of aspects of rurality in contemporary Japan. However, the chapters are highly diverse in quality, some being thought-provoking, innovative, empirically grounded, and theoretically compelling while others contribute little beyond a depiction of empirical case studies.

In sum, this volume constitutes a welcome addition to analyses of rural Japan. I recommend reading specific chapters as they offer overdue insights into ongoing socioeconomic developments in rural Japan and beyond. The book holds particular value for scholars in Japanese studies, rural economy, human geography, globalization studies, and anthropology and will be of interest to students of all levels as well as experts.

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