

John W. Traphagan, *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in 21st-Century Japan*

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In *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in 21st-Century Japan*, John Traphagan discusses entrepreneurship in rural Japan, drawing a map of the strategies, tactics, and long-term aspirations of his interlocutors. Juxtaposing anecdotal sources to wider demographic and economic figures from national and prefectural Japanese sources, Traphagan explores the dynamic (albeit declining) world of the Japanese countryside. Current pressing issues of Japanese rurality—such as population shrinkage, rural exodus, and economic decline—are the main forces against which Traphagan’s extravagant, dreamy, and at times reluctant (101) entrepreneurs measure themselves across two-and-a-half decades of ethnographic research.

Traphagan has been researching in Japan since the mid-1990s, focusing on aging, well-being, tradition, modernity, medicine, and religion. His geographical focus has largely been the agrarian Iwate Prefecture in Japan’s Tohoku region. This long-term engagement informs the book’s contents with depth and perspective. The book’s theoretical trajectory rests in the well-established field of rural studies in Japan, although the author provides a set of novel contextual reflections, systematically addressing the existential and self-actualization issues of his interlocutors.

Chapter 1 introduces the main research site in southern Iwate and provides the reader with two important definitions. The first defines “entrepreneurialism” as a form of risk management and the ability to innovate, access, and use available resources (5). The second concerns “contemporary rural Japan,” viewed as a system closely connected with the cosmopolitan city and strategically engaged in economic and social sustainability (29).

Chapter 2 produces a series of poignant examples addressing the depopulation of rural Japan and the social centrality of return migrants. These return migrants were born in rural environments but spent their formative years in urban ones. They later decided to return to their hometowns in the countryside and started independent, small-scale business activities. Such activities take advantage of the “entrepreneurial ecosystem” (70) produced by governmental, environmental, cultural, and economic factors that shape the constraints and possibilities of doing business in southern Iwate.

Chapter 3 follows the personal and professional life of “Akiko,” the owner of a gift shop in Kanegasaki town, as well as her interactions with the “ecosystem” of incentives, family relations, and individual trajectories. This chapter and the following one draw the conceptual core of Traphagan’s book, highlighting the pursuit of well-being as the main drive of small-scale entrepreneurship in rural Japan. Chapter 4 focuses on the counterintuitive aspect of reluctance, exploring a thriving family-run pharmacy in Ōshū and the parental obligations that led its co-owner, “Keiko,” to take on the family business. This case provides a second position opposed to the free and individual entrepreneurialism of “Akiko” in chapter 3. Between these two poles, Traphagan’s interlocutors swing in a pendulum-like motion, caught between the search for a better life and duties toward their families and loved ones.

Chapter 5 elaborates on three of the main ideas presented in the book through the experience of “Mariko,” owner of a gelateria in the middle of Iwate’s countryside. “Mariko,” a return migrant who after years spent abroad moves back to her hometown to take care of her elderly parents, sets up a small-scale enterprise borrowing money from her father. We can appreciate here the conflation between Traphagan’s concepts of neo-rurality (a highly connected, cosmopolitan reality), entrepreneurial creativity (the exotic Italian-styled ice cream), and the complex network of affordances actors operate within (family relations).

Traphagan’s book is a much-welcomed source of reflections for scholars and students of Japan, but as much as it reveals interesting depths, it neglects, in my opinion, a number of overarching factors. Traphagan insists on the interconnectedness and cosmopolitan rurality of Tohoku, but for whom exactly? Highly educated, sensitive, and independent individuals are portrayed here, but they emerge as if operating in a vacuum of social connections, family bonds excluded. Are these interlocutors indeed representative individuals of a “neo-rural” (28–29) emerging engagement with post-growth economies, creative mavericks who operate outside the norm (Klien 2020), or ethnographic interlopers? The reader is thus left craving a wider perspective on the social reality of Tohoku at large. Nevertheless, the book’s simple prose and the author’s ability to convey his ideas in a clear and concise manner make *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in 21st-Century Japan* a viable read for undergraduate students and academics alike.

REFERENCES

Klien, Susanne. 2020. *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society*. New York: SUNY Press.

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