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"Living the Life of My Choice"

Lifestyle Migrants in Rural Japan Balancing between Local Commitment and Transnational Cosmopolitanism

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic at the time of writing this article (November 2020), the 2008 Lehman Shock, and governmental revitalization policies introduced by the Abe government have resulted in a rise in urban lifestyle migrants who relocate to rural areas across Japan for noneconomic reasons. This ethnographic article focuses on individuals in Tokushima and Shimane Prefectures. Critically questioning conventional notions of work and lifestyle, these individuals struggle to implement their ideal lifestyles in their rural environments that are often characterized by deeply ingrained local societal norms and values. Drawing on longitudinal fieldwork since 2016, I will examine three cases of lifestyle migrants who have chosen to pursue radically different careers. While they make great efforts to blend into the community that they have relocated to, they also refer to transnational features in their pursuit of experimental lifestyles. This multi-sited ethnography aims to explore the "power of the between" by Paul Stoller (2009) and the "potential of the liminal" coined by Vincent Crapanzano (2004) as my interlocutors courageously carve out original careers that are catered to their own needs, but also engage with the local community.

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The ongoing pandemic has highlighted the excessive rigidity of corporate work in Japan, with the exception of IT ventures and international companies. According to a survey commissioned by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare between August and October 2020 with a sample of 3,788 companies (18.9 percent response rate), 34 percent responded that remote work has been introduced at their workplace or that the system of remote work does not exist, but there are employees who practice remote work. While politicians and entrepreneurs commit half-heartedly to enforcing remote work and more flexible modes of work in general, they most probably do not realize that their to-ing and fro-ing has already cost them dearly. Recent statistics by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications published in October 2020 indicate that more individuals have been leaving Tokyo than moving to the capital for four months in a row, with departures having increased by a striking 10.6 percent compared to one year before (NHK 2020). Many creative, highly educated individuals have made their choices and left corporate work or chosen to pursue new professional paths. Instead, they have relocated to rural areas in order to carve out careers that make more sense to them and facilitate sustainable lifestyles that permit more time with their family, more time for themselves, and more self-determination and freedom in the daily implementation of their work; in some cases, settlers strive for environmentally friendly lifestyles. Sustainability is meant in both a personal and environmental sense here. Ultimately, the stories that follow give us insightful examples to reflect on the limits of economic growth in what Hiroi Yoshinori refers to as "post-capitalism" (2019, iii).

In this study, I will explore the narratives and trajectories of three lifestyle migrants who I have followed since 2016. Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly have defined lifestyle migration as "the spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer potential of a better quality of life" (Benson and O'Reilly 2009, 2). My main interest is to explore and reflect on how features that have conventionally been dismissed rather negatively as "in-between" tie in with migrants' satisfaction about their quality of life in their newly chosen places of residence. After all, all three migrants state that they are highly satisfied with their present life, despite the fact that they earn less than in their previous careers in urban areas.

My original plan was to go back to these field sites and spend more time with my interlocutors. However, the ongoing pandemic at the time of writing this article (November 2020) made this impossible. For this reason, I conducted online follow-up interviews on Zoom in October 2020 to see how my collaborators are doing since the last time I spoke to them and spent time with them in the field. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and two hours and were conducted in Japanese.

My own identity as a European researcher living in Japan may have facilitated rapport with my interviewees, as we shared many experiences, values, and interests. Thinking back, I remember the salty smell of the sea, the fragrance of fresh herbs cultivated in the garden of one of my interviewees, and the visceral if ephemeral nature of animated conviviality—memories that seem more distant now than ever in the midst of an extended global pandemic.

However, given these experiences of time spent together and shared space, it was much easier to relate to my interlocutors and inquire about intimate issues such as liminality and feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. I agree with Paul Stoller that engagement in long-term research helps scholars to "achieve even a modicum of ethnographic understanding given the complexity of social and cultural conditions in transnational spaces" (Stoller 2009, 59). Although my field may not seem transnational at first sight, I posit that the past experiences of my interlocutors make their practices and narratives intrinsically translocal, and in some cases transnational. Migrants have brought their favorite Scandinavian blankets to their rural homes; they continue online conversations with friends overseas and cook foreign dishes with local ingredients. Conducting follow-up interviews after four to five years allowed me to resume the conversation with my collaborators, drawing on a relationship of trust infused with humor and the memories of common time spent years ago while discussing ontological themes of great depth.

As a matter of fact, mobilities studies scholar Noel Salazar defines mobility "as an assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experiences of people on the move and their translocal linkages" (Acharya 2016, 34). Salazar's understanding of mobility as intricately related to connections beyond bounded sites naturally ties in with cosmopolitanism in the sense of "world citizenship" (ibid., 37). The idea that individuals could feel "at home everywhere" (ibid., 37) and "live a lifestyle founded upon traveling and measuring 'transnational value' through cultural contacts while void of cultural prejudice" (Kleingeld and Brown 2013, cited in Acharya 2016, 37–38) features in all three narratives discussed in the following section. In a similar vein, a relational understanding of place as argued by Doreen Massey is also salient in the following vignettes: "What defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that place itself" (1994, 5).

In describing what they find appealing or lacking about their newly chosen place of residence, individuals invariably refer to places beyond, places that they have previously inhabited or visited. This echoes Pnina Werbner's interpretation of cosmopolitanism as "an ethical outlook and openness to the world that develops over time" (Werbner 2017, 32). As settlers draw on their cosmopolitan experiences, lifestyle migrants shape their places of living according to their needs and expectations. Their narratives shed light on the complex processual nature of blending in, sticking out,

liking and disliking, and accepting a place. This understanding of place as lines of movement echoes Tim Ingold's "meshworks" that people make and remake through their movements (2007). The focus of this article on the ambiguity that arises from mobility also resonates with Blai Guarne and Paul Hansen's understanding of circulation as "an open-ended process that is shaped by tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that are represented, reproduced and sustained in the circulation process itself through which ideas, things and people are assembled" (2018, 3).

The state of being "in-between" has generally been depicted as a preliminary zone that separates actors into committing to a "sense of mutuality or of alienation" (Boccagni and Brighenti 2017). Rather than a binary, however, I suggest that migrants' narratives indicate an ongoing interplay of reciprocity and departure, or to use Aurora Massa's terms, "a pendulum that swings between mobility and immobility" (2021, 69).

Related to this, another aim of this study is to elucidate the intricate concurrence of (im)mobility in the daily lives, thoughts, and practices of lifestyle migrants. Liisa Malkki has written about "sedentary metaphysics" (1992), arguing that conventional understanding assumes sedentary lifestyles as the only way of life. Lifestyle migrants tend to be associated with the other end of the spectrum, namely permanent mobility. However, their narratives and trajectories contain subtle negotiations of sedentary and mobile features after their relocation to rural regions. In this regard, the findings of this article resonate with Jamie Coates's research into the tension between belonging and mobility in the divided subjectivities and mobile lifestyles of transnational Chinese migrants in Japan (2019).

This article is structured as follows: after examining the trajectories and narratives of three lifestyle migrants in two field sites in Western Japan, I will explore the common features and differences of the individual vignettes with regard to translocalism, cosmopolitanism, agency, and (im)mobility. A final section will reflect on how these episodes matter in the metacontext of lifestyle, leisure, and work of post-growth societies.

For this study, these three interviewees have been selected for their strong overseas relationships (through study, travel, and leisure) before their relocation and their work that is (for some, literally) grounded in the local community. Furthermore, I have known all three participants between four and five years, having had the chance to observe their long-term activities in the field.

Between mini-bonsai and stationary entrepreneurship: The fabulous world of Aki

"Rather than flowers I like dried branches, decorating with acorns . . . and it's also fun to look for stones" (*Hana yori kareta eda suki de . . . sore o kazattari donguri toka . . . ato ishi o hirou no mo tanoshii*) (interview, October 9, 2020).

Seven years ago, Aki relocated from Tokyo to a small town in Tokushima Prefecture with idyllic landscapes (see figure 1). Having grown up in a neighborhood of housing complexes in Chiba Prefecture, she remembers that she has had an interest in rural life from early on. In her childhood she felt that she could never roam about freely

Figure 1. Rural landscape in Tokushima Prefecture. Photo by Susanne Klien.

in nature because it was forbidden to pick flowers or other things. Life in Tokushima is enjoyable to her, because she can pick what she likes—branches, leaves, stones, acorns—and take it all home for decoration.

At the age of twenty-two she joined a one-year boat trip with the nongovernmental organization Peace Boat. After her return to Japan, she felt that she wanted to see more of her own country and joined farm stays in the countryside. She was impressed by rural residents habitually making and repairing a lot of things by themselves and specifically their skill to solve most of the problems in their houses and surroundings by themselves. Aki felt that she wanted to emulate that in the future. "I want to become a farmer, literally [the Japanese term means one hundred jobs, *hyakushō*] so that I can do all kinds of things by myself. Make stuff, repair things. Right now, I am not doing that. I can fix the window screen [*amido*]. I try to solve things by myself, but if I can't manage, I reach out for help. I guess this is why I buy more equipment than before" (interview, October 9, 2020). And it was back then that she started to think about her dream of having her own shop, working at her own pace, and cultivating her own field to grow vegetables.

During the first three years after her relocation to Tokushima Prefecture, she worked as a regional revitalization cooperation officer (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*) for the local government.[1] The program has been highly popular with relatively young urbanites trying to start a second professional career. Working as a regional revitalization cooperation officer gave Aki plenty of opportunities to engage with the local community and think about what to do after the expiration of her contract. Three years ago, she managed to find the perfect place to realize her dream: she found a two-story house in the center of the town that seemed appropriate for opening her own stationery shop and lives on the second floor of the shop. In addition, she produces decorative miniature plants (*bonsai*) with a friend on Saturdays and one to two weekdays. In the mornings she engages in temporary work such as seasonal agricultural work.

"It's difficult to make a living from a stationery shop, so I have never planned on earning my income from that. I thought it would be good to have another job, so I got

involved in the bonsai project. Now I am doing these two jobs and it's just right for me. I don't think I am the kind of person to work voraciously. . . . I prefer to work with a long-term perspective but in accordance with my own pace. If I have enough money to pay my bills that's OK. I don't have grand ambitions, I just want to do what I like. Sometimes I do short-term work to pay my bills" (interview, October 9, 2020).

The stationery shop is usually open for a few hours in the afternoon or evening, three or four days a week. Aki regularly updates the homepage of her shop to announce the opening hours for every week.

Aki narrates that this March, she helped with the harvesting of carrots. She laughs that it was physically exhausting as she had to pick and pack carrots into boxes from 6:30 am to the late afternoon every day. The most exhausting seasonal work she has done so far was packing tea leaves into plastic bags at the local farming association.

According to Aki, the fact that she can combine several sorts of work makes her highly satisfied with her present life. She says that she is very happy. If she just did her work in the stationery shop, she might get bored. At the same time, she laughs that there are times when she would like to decrease the amount of work she does. But generally, she takes on all work that she is asked to do if she thinks that she can do it.

Her problem these days is her lack of holidays—she never gets a break, as she also works on weekends. In addition to the multiple jobs she has taken on, she is actively engaged in the local traditional dance group, which meets several times a week in the evenings. Her deep engagement with the local community is also evident from the fact that she regularly goes for drinks with local residents. "I often go out with senior men who are the age of my father or older," she giggles (interview, October 9, 2020). This is not surprising, given that rural Japan has faced high levels of aging, with some areas having 30%–50% senior citizens. This demographic change is also evident in the daily scenery of rural towns (figure 2).

Another issue she mentions is the pressure to marry. At her age of thirty-five, rural residents often mention the topic to her or introduce potential partners. "It is

Figure 2. Signs of aging in rural Japan. Photo by Susanne Klien.

a bit of a hassle. But after all, there is no point if I don't think it is the right person. I just say, 'if the timing is right . . . in the future.' And there are a lot of people who get divorced. Apart from that I don't really feel any pressure here."

"I want to go to Costa Rica one more time . . .": Local commitment and translocal cosmopolitanism

Aki's eyes start gleaming when we discuss global traveling. She mentions that she once visited the Easter Islands for a whole month and was deeply impressed. She made local friends and was taken to a local banana farm. "I wish I could go to Costa Rica one more time, the nature there was fantastic. Nature here [in this local town] is amazing as it is, but there is no jungle here really [laughs]. Being here after a rain is incredible—just seeing these landscapes makes me so happy" (interview, October 9, 2020; see figure 3).

Like the majority of other lifestyle migrants I interviewed, Aki has plenty of overseas traveling experience and perceives her present local life in comparison with this experience. While Aki seems content with her present sedentary life and does not mention plans of overseas relocation in the future, she says that she would like to travel to Taiwan and other places for short-term trips. Her wide traveling experiences overseas as well as across Japan have made her confident that she could blend in and feel at home anywhere. Indeed her social skills, cheerfulness, and quiet but determined and industrious character have made her popular in the small town.

Yu's travels and quest for the good life: From publishing to fisheries

Having interviewed Yu in 2016 and having discussed his trajectory in previous research (Klien 2020, 50–51), it feels great to catch up in a follow-up interview conducted on Zoom due to the pandemic. Now forty-one, but looking more like he is in his mid-thirties, Yu has hardly changed and is still working for the local fisheries

Figure 3. Verdant rape flowers against the background of the local "jungle." Photo by Susanne Klien.

on the remote island in Shimane Prefecture that he relocated to ten years ago with his family after having worked for a reputable publisher in Tokyo for 8.5 years. In 2019 Yu spent three months in the south of France with his family for vacation and study of local wines. It turns out that his new plan is to set up his own winery in the long term. He talks about visiting a well-known organic winery in Okayama Prefecture next month.

After their stay in France, Yu and his wife and two children traveled across the country to visit various friends. After their return to the island, he concedes that he felt that time has not progressed on the island (*anmari jikan ga susundeinai you ni miete tatta yonkagetsu*) and that the lack of things seems conspicuous, like the lack of public parks (interview, October 24, 2020).

Born in Yokohama, Yu has perceived his new place of residence in multilayered ways from the very start of his life there. On the one hand, he has made a strong commitment by choosing the option of working in the fisheries, as it involves sedentary work with local resources. On the other hand, he has always kept a keen eye on life overseas. Having spent a study stay in the US as a teenager, he embodies a natural flair for cosmopolitanism.

> For me, it does not really make a difference where I live. I have an ideal of how a community should be, what does this community look like. I have really understood the importance of things rooted in the soil. Until then I imagined it. But that does not mean that one has to be in that place forever physically speaking, since the relationship with the place continues. This is why I don't think it matters where one is to maintain this relationship. I get the sense that it is better to have several places like that . . . the number of friends also increases as a result. I think we could be happier if we had two places. (Interview, October 24, 2020)[2]

Yu's strong commitment to the local community evidently concurs with an inherently translocal outlook. After our initial interview four years ago, the friend who had introduced us and I were kindly invited to Yu's house. We were treated to a delicious meal, and I was impressed by the way he used fresh herbs from his garden to decorate the delicious local fish. Back then, his strong respect for the local community and local food and customs were hard to miss. And yet he also talked of how important it was for him to make sure that his children received an international education and mindset.

When I ask him whether he feels like an islander, Yu replies,

> I have a strong sense that I am . . . but how should I describe it. . . . I am someone who lives here, but I am not someone who was born here, so I am not a local . . . but personally, I don't think it makes much sense to distinguish people who were born here and who came here later. If one lives in a place, one becomes a member of that society . . . although I don't have a sense of belonging really. . . . When locals ask me whether I intend to bury my bones on the island [*hone o uzumeru*], I always say that I don't know. I have been asked this question right from when I moved here. I don't feel much stress here, the only thing that bothers me is that the speed of change is slow. I am not comparing it to other societies, but it just seems slow, relatively speaking. In this regard, it feels stressful." (Interview, October 24, 2020)

Whereas Yu states that his rate of satisfaction with his present life is high, he mentions his next big dream of setting up his own winery. The place is not determined yet, but he aims to make wine that fits the local food.

In other words, Yu is constantly reinventing himself in his quest for the good life. In his own view, his work as a publisher and his present work in the local fisheries association are not that different. While the means may be different, both revolve around communicating his values and ideals to his customers, hoping that they will consider them as something worthwhile. He hopes to use wines as a tool to communicate his values and ideals about how to live and his ideas about an ideal society. In his own words, "making sure that he is growing as a person is a constant source of positive stress" for him (*jibun ga seichō dekiteiru ka douka tte tsune ni motteiru positive na stress ka na*) (ibid.).

Yu describes his task of bringing change to the local fisheries. He mentions that the bluefin tuna has reached a dangerous limit, and yet Japan's measures to do something about this are way too slow compared to other countries. He indicates that communicating the merits of sustainable seafood to islanders is a big challenge. Throughout our entire conversation, Yu clearly approaches all issues simultaneously from a local and a translocal perspective. He may be one of the highly driven lifestyle migrants who seem satisfied with their decision to relocate to rural Japan; yet they are constantly seeking new opportunities to reinvent themselves in their insatiable quest for the good life.

"Fifteen seconds between my home and the office": Naoto's life on a remote island as luxury

"When I was running after the clouds, that was actually during work. It's a total red flag at the Japanese workplace to do that kind of thing [i.e., procrastinate]. Since I have the time to do that kind of thing, communicating things about the island to non-residents is something that is more than just a thing I have to do for work. I feel that I can do my work in a free manner."

Four years have passed since I spent time with Naoto, who is in his early thirties (Klien 2020, 108ff). Being my literal host during fieldwork on a remote island in western Japan, we shared the same accommodation, although we saw one another less than anticipated due to our intense (field)work commitments; we also met up in Tokyo at a relocation fair three years ago. "I still have no interest in Shimane Prefecture," he laughs drily at the start of our conversation. He looks unchanged, perhaps healthier. The follow-up interview reveals that his negative view of the island back then has been replaced with a quiet respect for the local community. I am surprised that Naoto, who used to make sarcastic jokes about everything and anything, now talks about his "reverence of nature" (*shizen o daiji ni to iu ka aijō o motte*) (interview, October 13, 2020). "I have started to engage with nature consciously through my work, so work and life are intricately related now." Naoto works for a culinary project that invites chefs from across Japan for a limited period of time to educate young individuals aiming to become chefs, using fresh local ingredients. Naoto is in charge of overall coordination, making sure that the exchange goes smoothly.

Having graduated from a top university in Tokyo, Naoto took on a corporate job in a well-reputed but traditional company. For him, the prospect of having the opportunity to work overseas seemed the big attraction, as he had spent several months in Moscow as a student. Once he joined the company, it turned out that overseas work did not necessarily mean working with the locals. Disillusioned, he quit his job—only to find that the new job an acquaintance had promised him did not work out at the last minute. Facing unemployment for several months, he remembers that he spent his time sitting on benches in public parks, intensively pondering what he wanted to do with his life. His dream was to move overseas and start a dairy farm in Hungary. However, now that he has spent five years on the island and is highly satisfied with his job, it turns out that he has postponed his plans to relocate to Hungary. He explains that in retrospect, he sees his relocation to the island as a mid-size risk that permits him to pursue his long-term plans. When I ask why Hungary, he concedes that there are personal reasons as he mentions a romance with a Hungarian girl in his student days. He also adds that in contrast to Western Europe, Eastern Europe seems to offer surprises.

Naoto did not have any personal connections with the island he has relocated to, but he applied for a vacancy as regional revitalization cooperation officer and got the job, which was limited to three years. After the expiration of the contract he started working on his ongoing culinary project. Naoto smiles, "You can call it a luxury, the way I work at present. If I come up with something I would like to do, I get the green light. Of course there is also pressure that comes with this. I am not sure whether there is a better job for now—of course I haven't looked for it, it would require a major effort" (interview, October 13, 2020). In addition to the considerable level of self-determination at work, Naoto mentions the fresh food he enjoys daily at virtually no cost as an added luxury. "I don't think that I could enjoy freshly made tofu and fish like I can do now anywhere else." He pensively observes that he is proud of having acquired skills to communicate with individuals coming from totally different backgrounds from himself, such as fishermen in the small village where he lives. He also points out his beautiful working environment: towering mountains in his back, a beautiful cherry tree right behind him, and the coastline nearby. He laughs, saying that it only takes him fifteen seconds to get from his house to his workplace (*Aruite 15 byō gurai . . . ima . . . sundeiru tokoro to shokuba*).

I vividly remember that the last time we talked he mentioned that he felt constrained by being on an island. Clearly, his feelings about the island have changed dramatically as a result of his food-related work that has drawn attention to the importance of nature in his daily life, something that comes as a first in his previously urban life. "What do I reply when locals ask me about whether I intend to stay on the island? I always respond that I don't know." His reluctance to commit himself for a lifetime also extends to the private realm. He chuckles impishly when I ask him whether he still has no interest in getting married, as we already discussed this four years ago. "When locals ask me, I just nod my head and say 'some day' and then move on to some other topic" (interview, October 13, 2020). Naoto concedes that he likes spending time by himself. Before, he shared his house with various interns, students, and other short-term visitors. He says that he has decided to keep the house just for

himself as he is getting old at thirty-two. For his upcoming ten-day holiday in two weeks, he plans to do some camping by himself near a national park in Western Japan where he can see the island across the sea. "I haven't made any concrete plans yet," he chuckles. Previously, he usually spent his holidays seeing his family or friends in Tokyo and Osaka and using the time to see art museums and the like. This time, he says, he hopes to get more adventure and do something he has not done before.

Like Aki and Yu, despite his penchant for melancholic, reflexive solitude, Naoto says that he regularly drinks with local acquaintances and friends in the fishing village that he lives in. His capability to communicate with fishermen, his acquired taste for nature, his appreciation of the subtle changes of the season all indicate his deep, visceral, and intellectual engagement with and reverence of the local community and its values. At the same time, he also argues that short-term trips to other places provide him with precious opportunities to refresh his mindset and experience more diverse vantage points. "Since I can experience a pretty deep way of living on the island [*shima de kanari fukai ikikata dekiru kara*], when I go to urban areas there are so many feelings I get [*tokai ni ittara kanjiru koto mechakucha ōku naru*]. After having these feelings, I get back to the island and can put all of this into words—this is a cycle that I feel comfortable with" (interview, October 13, 2020).

Discussion

"While insiders may find it difficult to see the world from any point of view other than their own, a visitor may try out a plurality of perspectives without any personal loss of status or identity, because he is already marked as marginal, stateless and indeterminate" (Jackson 2005, 49). Michael Jackson's incisive concept of the "visiting imagination" of the outsider suggests that this mindset is a "way of destabilising habitual patterns of thinking by thinking his own thoughts in the place of somebody else" (ibid.).

Such oscillating perspectives are all evident in the three trajectories and narratives introduced in the preceding paragraphs. Coates argues, "Whether stuck between here and there, or socially embedded in 'here *and* there', migrants live in ways positioned between established or normative social orders" (2019, 37). Aki, Yu, and Naoto engage in vastly different activities, hold diverse values, and come from different sociocultural contexts. However, they all manage to juxtapose a deep local commitment with a strong cosmopolitan mindset that resulted from their previous overseas experiences during their student or gap-year days. Aki traveled around the world for one year; Yu studied in the US and just came back from an extended family vacation in France recently; Naoto remembers that his stay in Russia was a life-changing experience and has dreams of an overseas move and starting a dairy farm in Hungary in the future. Previous experiences of traveling, living, and working overseas have shaped their modes of thinking to such an extent that movement—both physically and in an abstract sense—permeates their narratives, imaginaries, and daily behavior. In this regard, all three settlers correspond to Simon Avenell's "locally informed yet globally sensitive" actors in his study of transnational environmental activism in Japan and beyond (2017, 9). This image of an interview site taken in an

office in Tokushima Prefecture embodies the transnational mindset that features in the practices and narratives of many of my interlocutors (figure 4).

Notions of existing "in-between" have conventionally been associated with "restless movement" that is "here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth" (Bhabha 1994, 1) and hence have tended to be dismissed as a minus. However, the potential of the tension, or perhaps dynamics, of a constellation that involves here and there has not been awarded the attention it deserves.

Figure 4. Urban settler's office in rural Japan. Photo by Susanne Klien.

Drawing on Paul Stoller's ideas about "the power of the between" (2009), these individuals confirm the potential of the liminal (Crapanzano 2003), as "the liminal offers us a view of the world to which we are normally blinded by the usual structures of social and cultural life" (ibid., 53 in Stoller 2009, 6). Liminality has often been associated with upheaval, discomfort, lack of belonging, and constraint. Yet, these cases indicate that Stoller's ideas of the liminal as "a space of creative imagination, of provocative linkages, of personal empowerment" (2009, 6) continue to be relevant. Naoto's episode of running after the clouds, Aki's leisure activity of picking wild flowers and collecting stones near the river, and Yu's usage of fresh herbs grown in his garden when cooking meals all indicate the creative use of natural resources that most local residents would not consider using. Yet, for my interlocutors, these small things constitute their personal treasures and are held in high esteem. Evidently, these small things are crucial factors that contribute to the subjective well-being of individual settlers and their satisfaction with living in rural areas. Ultimately, not only the practices of regularly using these things in their daily lives but also disseminating them on the internet through their social networks could be interpreted as a new take on the meaning of place through their eyes—shaping the place in accordance with their needs and preferences. Wild flowers and stones may be considered worthless in a small town that has plenty of them; however, from the point of view of someone who has grown up in a concrete housing complex near Tokyo with few plants around,

these wild flowers are perceived in an entirely different way. These vignettes also illustrate the coalescence of diverse experiential temporalities and spatialities in migrants' practices and imaginaries and resonate with Caroline Pearce's "liminality as a way of life" (2013).

Aki may be the person among my three interlocutors who questions local values the least. Her long-term fascination with rural lifestyles and deep interest in tactile manual work in daily life clearly play a crucial role in her smooth acceptance of local habits. However, she shows resilience to imposed values of marriage and lifelong employment by carving out her own livelihood and spending her leisure time with a variety of friends, both local and newcomers, across generations.

Yu's initial mission to bring change to the local fisheries implies tasks and activities that are bound to meet with local skepticism in a deeply conservative fishing community. Not surprisingly, he mentions the challenges of making local fishermen understand the importance of sustainable fishing. While he refrains from explicit criticism, his observations about what he feels is lacking in the local community after coming back from France emphasize his strong underlying transnational perspective.

In a similar vein, Naoto has yet to abandon his long-held ambition to move overseas, despite his enthusiasm for his present lifestyle and work. Naoto seems to have converted his initial frustration about the boundaries of island life into a positive mindset by focusing on things hitherto unnoticed in his previous urban mode of life and making them part of his lived experience: cherishing nature, feeling alive, enjoying fresh food.

A strong passion for learning new skills beyond office work, reinventing oneself, and broadening one's perspective by acquiring the capability to approach things from different vantage points recur in all three narratives of my interlocutors. Despite their diversity, they share a salient interest in self-determination, freedom for extended self-reflection and incubation rather than following instructions by superiors, a predilection for constant self-growth, and ultimately living a lifestyle that they have consciously chosen and that fits them and their families.

In his poignant mobility studies manifesto, Stephen Greenblatt proposes that "mobilities studies should account in new ways for the tension between individual agency and structural constraint" (2010, 251). The experiences examined in the preceding paragraphs are without any doubt examples of lived agency, "the ability to exert one's will and to act in the world" (Boehm et al., 2011, 7). Interlocutors did not necessarily elaborate explicitly on issues of agency during our conversations; however, the topic featured in various ways.

It comes as no surprise that none of the lifestyle migrants introduced in this article have any regrets about their decision to relocate to rural areas and the radical changes this has brought to their lives. These narratives powerfully demonstrate the ongoing shift from postwar Japan with its focus on material affluence and economic growth to a post-growth society where individuals have started to depart from long-held values such as seniority, lifelong employment, and gendered societal roles in their quest to pursue lives that make sense to them rather than to their parents. In this sense, this study echoes Gordon Mathews's observation that "Japanese society as a whole seems notably more individualistic and accepting of individual difference than 30 and 40

years ago" (2017, 230–31). The narratives introduced here illustrate the emergence of lifestyles that allow a more flexible organization of work and life. Individuals' daily lives suggest that "living in a manner that involves living for oneself" (Nishimura 2009) is gaining ground in Japanese post-growth society. All three migrants have relocated to rural regions in order to engage in activities that are in tune with their personal values and their individual and their families' subjective well-being. Entrepreneurship in one's thirties, working in fisheries without any previous related experience, continuing to live as a single despite being in one's thirties—these are all trajectories that involve surprise, challenge of societal conventions, a sense of adventure, and the courage to pursue the paths they have chosen regardless of the pervasive normativity of *sekentei*, namely what others may think.

At the same time, however, all three migrants seem well versed in ensuring good relations with local residents in their communities. Naoto regularly goes for a drink at his neighbors' houses in the same hamlet he lives in, just as Aki does, who seems highly popular for drinking outings in the small town she has moved to. Yu hints at the limits of what is feasible on a remote island; yet he is passionate about the importance of sustainability in fishing and continues to make attempts to assert change.

In other words, I contend that we need to be more careful in ascribing agency to lifestyle migrants. Greenblatt has astutely argued that "it is important to note that moments in which individuals feel most completely in control may, under careful scrutiny, prove to be moments of the most intense structural determination, while moments in which the social structure applies the fiercest pressure on the individual may in fact be precisely those moments in which individuals are exercising the most stubborn will to autonomous movement" (2010, 251–52).

Two of my three interlocutors introduced in this article have used the *chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai* (regional revitalization cooperation officer) program by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (*Sōmushō*) designed to attract urban residents to rural regions to promote regional revitalization. Clearly, these three settlers have weighed their decisions carefully before making these significant lifestyle changes. Aki mentioned that she was shaped by images in lifestyle magazines showing newcomers engaging in farming, living in beautiful wooden houses, and having their own shops (interview, October 9, 2020). Whereas the narratives discussed seem to be permeated by a strong drive for agency and self-determination, their trajectories contain a complex interplay of individual agency and structural constraint. Ironically, two of the discussed lifestyle migrants joined a program envisaged by elite bureaucrats in their pursuit of more self-determination. If we scrutinize their narratives more closely, we find numerous hints of newcomers' process of negotiation with what Greenblatt refers to as "the sensation of rootedness" (2010, 252). Yu states that he does not believe in commitment to only one locality, as he believes that commitment to several places makes more sense socially. Naoto elaborates on the meaningful cycle of living deeply on the island and going for brief trips to other places for a change of perspective. Aki clearly perceives daily life in the small town that she has relocated to in global terms as she compares the local woods with overseas landscapes on her previous travels that have left a deep impression on her.

All three cases illustrate a strong cosmopolitan outlook—an approach that transcends rootedness not only verbally but also through practice in daily life: Naoto's running after clouds during worktime; Yu taking a three-month holiday in the French fashion, despite his status as a corporate employee in the deeply conservative fishing sector; and Aki's entrepreneurial activities and self-determined independence, despite her youth. Interestingly, all three do not deny locality through their cosmopolitanism; on the contrary, they are strongly committed to and on good terms with the local community. Yet they clearly transcend their locality both physically and otherwise. This inherent enmeshment of local and cosmopolitan elements constitutes a powerful and empowering mechanism that clearly confirms the "potential of the liminal" (Crapanzano 2003; see figure 5).

This enmeshment of local and cosmopolitan features also brings us back to the concurrence of mobility and immobility discussed at the start of this article. All three lifestyle migrants are deeply satisfied with rural life yet also openly point out what they consider deficiencies. All three pursue careers that are distinctly sedentary as they work with local resources of various kinds. Nevertheless, they approach these careers from nonlocal and/or global points of view. By doing so, they manage to tailor

Figure 5. Encountering a Vietnamese coffee stall in rural Japan, an example of local and cosmopolitan enmeshment. Photo by Susanne Klien.

jobs that entail both dedication to the local community as well as transcendence beyond it, both in a physical and abstract manner.

Finally, the narratives presented in this article imply a deconstruction of the conventional notion of rurality. All three lifestyle migrants introduced in the article refer to a coalescence of rural and urban; local and translocal/transnational; emic and etic; present, past, and future; here and there. John Traphagan argues that "rural Japan is a social and geographical space in which the binary juxtaposition of rural and urban, rustic and cosmopolitan really do not have a great deal of meaning from an analytical perspective, even while people living in those areas may continue to think and talk about the differences between life in the cities and in the countryside" (2020, 238–39). The trajectories, narratives, and practices of newcomers outlined

here confirm Traphagan's observation, as they have revealed a profoundly hybrid, multilayered, and often conflicting open-ended process that is exposed to constant circulation between mobility and immobility, local and global, past and present, here and there.

Outlook

Last but not least, the ongoing pandemic could accelerate interest in moving to rural areas. The Lehman Shock in 2008, the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, and an increasingly precarious job market have already resulted in more interest in rural moves as a viable option for many. Recent statistics indicate that one out of four corporate workers are pondering a move due to the shift to online work. In August 2020, the CEO of Pasona Group Inc., a recruitment agency, announced that it will move its headquarters and 1,200 of its employees from Tokyo to Awaji Island off Kobe in Western Japan. Whereas this move met with diverse reactions ranging from enthusiasm to skepticism, it may indicate an imminent paradigm shift in centralized Japan.

This large-scale change in the way work is organized may indeed enforce the more positive idea of "communities of hope" (*kibō shūraku*), as one of my interlocutors put it (Klien 2020), rather than the pervasive negative notion of "marginal village" (*genkai shūraku*) coined by sociologist Ono Akira to denote a community with two-thirds of its residents over sixty-five years old (2008). Against the background of the ongoing pandemic, this new generation of cosmopolitan urbanite settlers who bring together hybrid elements of rural and urban in their daily lives outlined in this article are bound to create a lasting impact on understandings of work, leisure, and lifestyle in contemporary Japan. This may eventually result in shifting associations of rural Japan from places with limited perspective, work, and prospects to places that offer opportunities as "experimental grounds" (Klien 2020), both professional and private, and quality of life for those creative enough to grasp them. In other words, rural regions may be associated with agency rather than with constraint in the future, if in the multilayered meanings portrayed in this article.

Author

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Notes

1. Funded by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, this program started in 2009 to provide incentives to relatively young individuals to move to "structurally disadvantaged

areas." In 2009, there were only eighty-nine officers as compared to 3,978 in 2016 and 5,359 in 2018; 39.4 percent are female. In terms of age range, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the majority are in their twenties (29.6 percent), thirties (37.7 percent), and forties (22.7 percent) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2020).

2. *Hitotsu wa doko de mo ii sumu basho doko de mo iin da kedo . . . community no katachi ni risō ga atte . . . sore ga nandarō na . . . aa sō iu ka . . . tochi ni nezasu koto no daijisa ga kotchi ni kite kara wakatte . . . sore made wa sōzō dake dattan de . . . sono tochi ni butsuriteki ni zutto iru tte anmari imi nai to omotte . . . kankeisei ga tsuzuku node . . . dakara un . . . nandarō na . . . dono basho de mo soko no basho ni nezashite ikitai to omō . . . tabun fukusū ga atta hou ga nantonaku nandarō . . . tomodachi no kazu mo nibasho da to nibai ni naru shi . . . sochira no hō ga shiawase na no ka na tte ki ga shimasu.*

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