

## Japan

**Susanne Klien, *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society***

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020. 232 pages. Hardcover, \$95.00; paperback, \$32.95. ISBN 9781438478050 (hardcover), 9781438478067 (paperback).

Susanne Klien's readable and useful book explores the experience of domestic migrants from urban centers to less populated areas of Japan, a topic deserving research and reflection. It is interesting that John Traphagan's (2020) new book deals with many of the same themes but in a very different way. A great strength of *Urban Migrants in Rural Japan: Between Agency and Anomie in a Post-Growth Society* is its readability. Klien paints a very interesting picture of a specific subset of urban-rural migrants using a variety of different examples to demonstrate her points. The geographic range, from the Oki Islands in Shimane Prefecture through Iwate to Hokkaido, allows a fairly substantial picture to be drawn. The informants come across as real people dealing with real lives, and the qualitative material is well presented. While I am not very interested in most applications of what is called "social theory"—I find it often jargon-laden and unhelpful—I am especially interested in Klien's application of Victor Turner's concept of "liminality" (1996), the idea that migrants are neither here nor there. It is particularly applicable to many of her somewhat marginal (in the economic sense) migrants, but it applies to all of us who are "strangers." As Georg Simmel's classic essay (1972) points out, outsiders have distinct advantages and disadvantages, but the movement away from the category of "outsider" is difficult and often quite long.

This book will be valuable for many audiences in different ways. While many will find the range of experiences recounted to be valuable, undergraduates may find the "reality" of many of the areas discussed novel and important. The perception of Japan, particularly from outside of the country, but also in the great metropolitan centers, seems to be that the Tokyo metropolitan area is Japan and nothing else really counts. Japan's non-metropolitan areas are largely ignored by much of the English-language literature. Peter Mantale and Anthony S. Rausch's (2011) book on "shrinking regions" is one of the better recent contributions on this issue. Professionals will appreciate the breadth of the research effort as well as the exploration of what has been hitherto essentially ignored.

The geographic spread is very useful and gives a picture of more than just one place. Klien also rather nicely distinguishes between "lifestyle" migrants and migrants with other motivations. However, information on economic circumstances of the informants seems a bit limited. Most of these migrants appear to be economically marginal with temporary or unstable employment living in share houses. While the qualitative data is extremely interesting, the book could use quantitative support. Klien does not really provide much context concerning how the migrants she is describing fit into larger patterns. Are all the urban/rural migrants of this socioeconomic grouping? Are they all relatively young? This returns us, again, to the idea of "liminality." These seem to be largely people who are "in between" in many senses, not just migration.

An area where some may quibble is that Klien defines neither what she is considering "urban" nor "rural." This makes it difficult to consider the significance of what she is

describing. Part of this is a very confusing system Japan has adopted to describe various civic units. Since political consolidation in 2005, whereby the government bribed or coerced smaller civic units to form larger ones, huge areas of Japan are now officially “cities” (anything more than thirty thousand people, regardless of density). Apparently, Klien refers to Japan’s great metropolitan centers as “urban,” as she mentions Osaka and Tokyo frequently. However, it is not clear just what is considered “rural.” As an example, Kitaakita City has a population total of more than thirty thousand, but this population is spread out over more than 1,150 square kilometers, giving a population density of only twenty-seven people per square kilometer. Therefore, it is officially “urban” (i.e., a city), but most of it is most definitely rural with a couple of very small towns scattered about. In fact, nearly 92% of Kitaakita City is forested mountains, hardly what would normally be referred to as a “city” in most places.

The lack of precision in Japanese law and politics is hardly the author’s fault, but she could have done more to discuss just what sort of places she is exactly talking about. To be fair, some are really obvious. The Oki Islands, off the coast of Shimane Prefecture, are both remote and rural by any definition. However, she also refers to Tono City in Iwate, which has both urban and rural components, similar to Kitaakita City. “Downtown” Tono is obviously a small city, but the whole *shi* (city) only has a population density of slightly over thirty-one people per square kilometer, so much of it is clearly rural.

Another area where some may quibble is the author’s repeated use of the word “empirical” for her material. While it is “empirical” in the sense that the research is based on real observations grounded in the author’s actual fieldwork experience (which is a very major strength), it is not really something that could be verified or replicated, particularly given the author’s vagueness about the fieldwork locations. This is not, in this sort of work, a major weakness, but it is brought into focus because the author uses the term often.

Overall, however, this is a very interesting and useful book. It shines a light on a population that while not terribly large in and of itself is moving “against the trend” of continued urbanization in Japan.

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