

Paper to be presented at Expert Group Meeting in Celebration of the 30th anniversary of the International Year of the Family, 2024 (28-29 February 2024, The Everly Hotel, Kuala Lumpur)  
Families and Megatrends: Interlinkages between migration, urbanization, new technologies, demographic trends and climate change

## Emerging Trends in Domestic Migration Patterns in Japan

Rokuro TABUCHI (Sophia University, Japan)

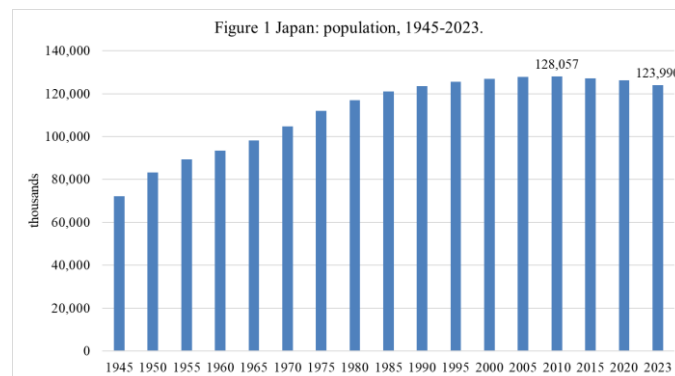
### Introduction

Population decline represents a pressing reality in numerous developed nations, driven by decreasing fertility rates and aging demographics. The ramifications of population decline and aging are anticipated to pose multifaceted challenges to economies and societies (Trask, 2022). This paper examines the recent trends in domestic migration within Japan, a nation at the forefront of population decline among developed countries, serving as a case study. Specifically, the focus is on elucidating how domestic migration patterns in Japan correlate with family formation among the younger demographic cohort. Drawing insights from this analysis, policy recommendations pertinent to the themes of the Expert Group Meeting will be presented.

### 1. Population Decline and Aging in Japan

#### Population decline

Japan has been among the first developed nations to witness a population decline since the onset of the 21st century. The 2015 census marked the initial decrease in the total population since 1920, and this downward trend has persisted thereafter (Figure 1).

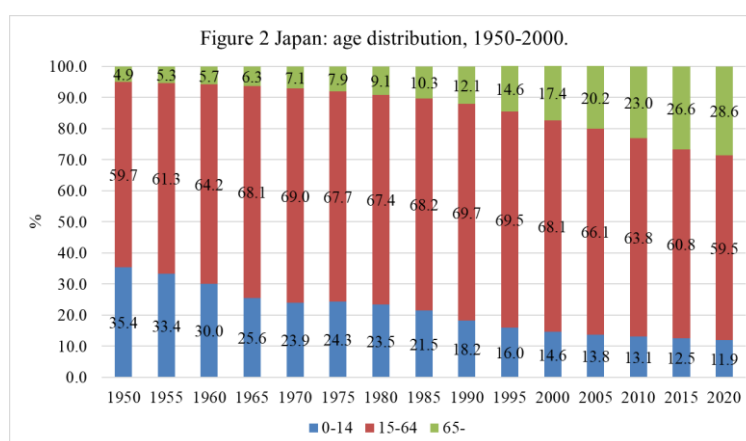


Demographically, this scenario was foreseeable, given that Japan's total fertility rate has remained below 2.1 since the 1970s. However, within an already aging society, the pace of population decline is poised to accelerate in the absence of significant policy interventions. According to the latest long-term projections, the total population is projected to dip below 100 million by the latter half of 2050,

accompanied by a notable decline in the working-age population. This demographic shift is already exerting considerable strain on Japanese society (Tsuya, 2014; Hattori et al., 2017).

### Aging of the population

The aging of the population has escalated, exacerbated in part by the prolonged decline in birth rates, which has diminished the number of individuals in their reproductive years (Figure 2). The repercussions of population decline and aging have emerged as a significant concern, primarily driven by labor force shortages (Tsuya, 2014). Recent population estimates indicate that the aging rate surpassed 29% in 2023 and is forecasted to reach 37% by 2050. Some analysts anticipate that the aging and population decline will further accelerate, attributed to the continued reduction in births stemming from the COVID-19 since 2020 (Ghaznavi et al., 2022).



### Exclusionary immigration policies

As Japan ushers in the 21st century, its total population experiences a decline, juxtaposed with a gradual increase in the foreign population. The number of foreign residents surged from approximately 1.3 million in 2000 to over 2.7 million in 2020, marking a significant shift considering the sluggish growth of Japan's foreign population throughout the 20th century. Nonetheless, even by 2020, the proportion of the foreign population remained at around 2%, ranking among the lowest among OECD countries.

Despite grappling with an aging population that has magnified labor shortages, the Japanese government lacks a definitive immigration policy and persists in adhering to an exclusionary measures toward immigrants, primarily admitting individuals with highly specialized skills (Komine, 2018). A comparison with Germany underscores Japan's exclusionary stance in immigration policy (Hein, 2012). Over the past two decades, Japan's labor strategy has leaned towards offsetting labor shortages by bolstering the labor force participation of elderly individuals and women, rather than through immigration policies (Shinkawa 2012). The discourse surrounding a shift in immigration policy has

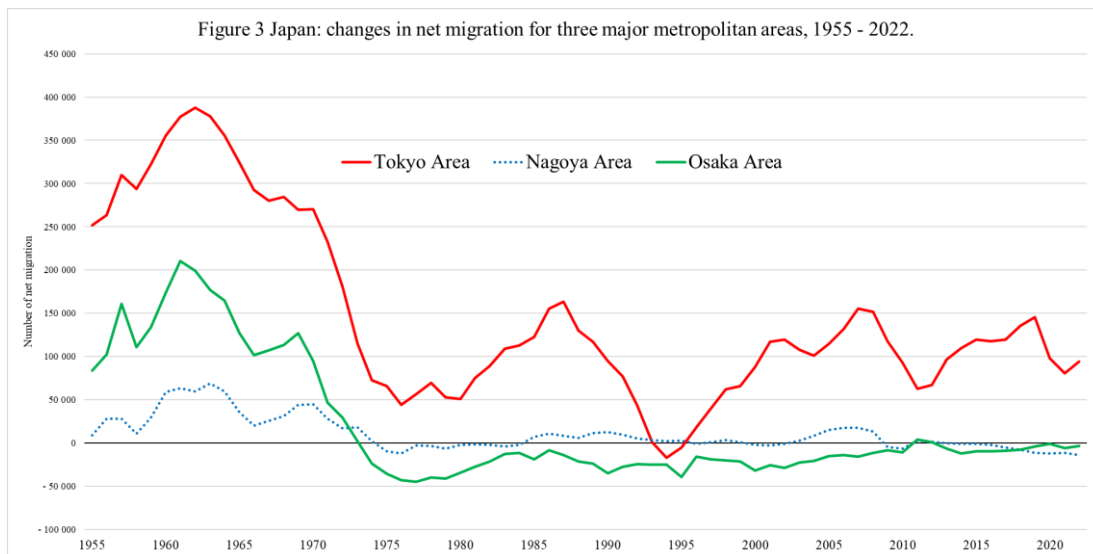
resurfaced intermittently since the 1990s. Moreover, public opinion surveys conducted in Japan over the past two decades indicate a majority favorability towards accepting foreign workers. However, many political factions remain hesitant to enact substantial changes in immigration policy. Consequently, this casts a shadow over Japan's economic and social prospects.

## **2. Recent internal migration trends in Japan**

The impact of population decline and aging on social dynamics varies significantly across regions. A critical mediating factor is domestic migration, particularly in a society like Japan, where international migration is limited. Over the past seven decades, internal migration in Japan has undergone noteworthy transformations. While there exist commendable studies on this subject (Fielding 2017; Ishikawa 2020), this discussion centers on recent trends.

During the 1950s and 1960s, amid Japan's rapid industrialization and urbanization as part of the postwar reconstruction, a substantial demographic shift unfolded, especially among the younger populace, towards metropolitan areas in pursuit of employment and educational opportunities. By the 1960s, the term "severe depopulation" emerged, signaling the gravity of depopulation as a social issue. Administratively, depopulated areas are delineated as regions experiencing a pronounced population decline. In 2020, the proportion of population in depopulated stood at approximately 9%.

Analyzing net migration figures for the three metropolitan areas, which attract a considerable share of domestic migrants (Figure 3), migration to these areas plummeted sharply from the 1970s onward, coinciding with the cessation high economic growth (Fielding, 2017). Moreover, population growth in the Osaka and Nagoya areas has hovered close to zero or even turned negative since the 1980s. Since the 1990s, with economic activities and recreational amenities increasingly concentrated in the Tokyo area, a discernible trend toward population concentration in the Tokyo metropolitan area has emerged (Ishikawa, 2020). Given the tendency for lower fertility rates in urbanized settings, the concentration of population in metropolitan areas may exacerbate the decline in fertility rates.



While reports suggest that COVID-19 triggered an uptick in out-migration from the Tokyo metropolitan area, a study examining annual household registration data up to 2020 revealed a contrasting trend. In 2020, migration from the city center to the suburbs surged within the Tokyo metropolitan area, but there was no notable increase in migration to non-metropolitan areas (Kotsubo and Nakaya, 2023). Despite the significant shifts in work dynamics and interpersonal relationships induced by COVID-19 in Japan, the trend towards heightened population concentration in the Tokyo metropolitan area has not experienced significant alteration, at least for the time being.

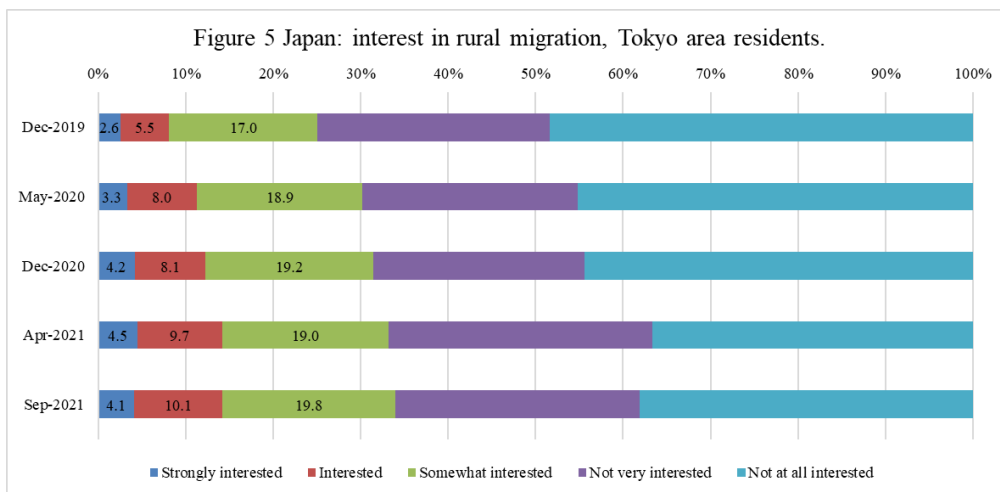
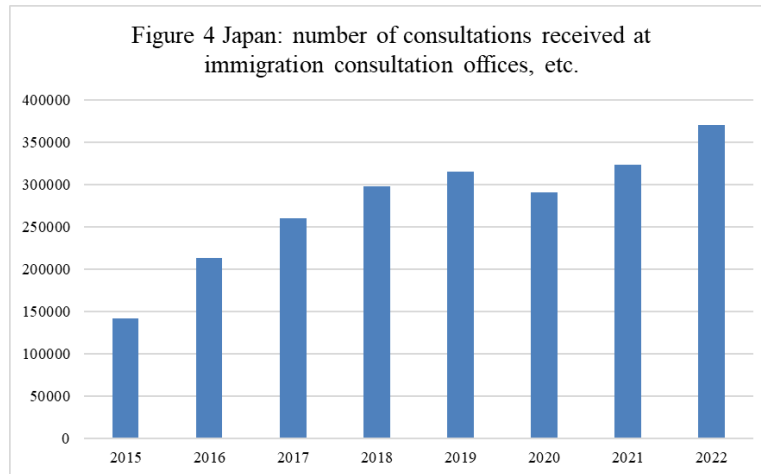
### 3. Trends in counterurbanization

As previously noted, recent domestic migration patterns in Japan have been characterized by a concentration of population in metropolitan areas. However, a closer examination reveals a distinct shift known as “counterurbanization,” involving migration from metropolitan to non-metropolitan areas. While counterurbanization encompasses various phenomena (Mitchell, 2004), this paper contextualizes recent domestic migration within the framework of lifestyle migration, a subset of counterurbanization. Lifestyle migration typically denotes relocation by relatively affluent individuals; however, here, the term is employed more broadly to signify purposeful migration driven by the pursuit of an enhanced quality of life (Benson and O’Reilly 2009: 610).

Firstly, a notable trend of retirement migration has emerged. Ishikawa’s analysis of population movements across prefectural boundaries using late 2000s census data reveals a propensity for individuals in their early 60s, corresponding to retirement age, to relocate to rural areas proximate to metropolitan regions or areas with vacation properties (Ishikawa, 2016). Whether COVID-19 has accelerated this trend remains subject to analysis in the forthcoming census.

Secondly, a heightened interest in migration from metropolitan to rural areas, particularly among the younger generation, has been observed. According to the “Survey on Migration Consultations”

conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the number of consultations has steadily risen since 2015 (MIC 2023) (Figure 4). Moreover, a survey by the Cabinet Office examining residents of the Tokyo metropolitan area regarding their inclination towards rural migration indicates a slight uptick in interest post-COVID-19 (Figure 5). The survey also reveals a relatively high percentage of individuals in their 20s expressing interest in rural migration (Cabinet Office 2021: 19). The advent of remote work across various industries and the allure of superior natural and residential environments in rural areas may have contributed to these gradual shifts.



Thirdly, concerning migration to depopulated regions (including return migration to one’s place of origin), studies suggest that purposeful migration predominates among the younger generation. Yamamoto (2017) investigated migration motivations in a western Japan town during the late 2000s. Responses indicated that while the older generation cited reasons aligned with traditional family values (such as caregiving to elderly parents), the younger generation was motivated by practical considerations, such as proximity of workplaces accessible for commuting.

In summary, these findings underscore the emergence of a distinct trend in domestic migration, with individuals relocating to depopulated areas in pursuit of enhanced living conditions and personal

fulfillment. These shifts may be correlated with various governmental initiatives in the 21st century aimed at revitalizing depopulated and rural areas (Dilley et al., 2022). One notable initiative is the Local Vitalization Cooperator (LVC) program inaugurated in 2009 (Zollet and Qu, 2024). Under this scheme, individuals hired as Cooperators, predominantly from metropolitan areas, transfer their residency to local communities, primarily in depopulated areas, for terms ranging from one to three years, engaging in activities to revitalize the local community. Local authorities recruit the workers, with financial backing from the Japanese government. Most are individuals in their 30s or younger. Following their tenure, a majority settle down, often establishing businesses in the area. It is not uncommon for their migration to catalyze further inward migration. A 2022 survey revealed that many Cooperators applied driven by aspirations for self-fulfillment, such as a desire for rural living or to leverage their previous experiences (JOIN, 2023). This behavior among the younger generation can also be classified as a form of lifestyle migration.

The primary impediment to the substantial manifestation of such lifestyle migration and counterurbanization is the concentration of employment and educational opportunities in metropolitan areas. Instances abound in depopulated areas where families who relocated from cities return to urban centers when their children reach high school age. Tackling these challenges necessitates comprehensive reforms in education and employment paradigms.

#### 4. Regional diversity of counterurbanization

Recent population movement from metropolitan and urban areas to depopulated regions can be characterized as lifestyle migration, representing a novel trend in domestic migration. However, depopulated areas disadvantaged by their distance from cities with a high concentration of industry and the absence of higher education institutions are less likely to be selected as migration destinations. The most disadvantaged cases are remote islands, which, by definition, are isolated from the mainland by sea, making daily commutes to the mainland for school or work challenging. According to the Japanese government's definition, remote islands exclude the five main islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and Okinawa.

Table 1 Population and geographic condition of the four remote islands

<b>Remote island</b>	<b>Population (2020)</b>	<b>Geographic condition</b>
Ama Town	2267	Very disadvantageous
Ojika Town	2291	Very disadvantageous
Tsushima City	28502	Very disadvantageous
Sado City	51492	Disadvantageous

By comparing population trends on remote islands, it is possible to discern how the proactive efforts of local governments can influence the trend of domestic migration, particularly lifestyle migration to

depopulated areas. Hereafter, I compare four remote islands in terms of population, all classified as depopulated areas, each comprising a single administrative district but differing in size and geographic-historical conditions. These islands are Ama Town in Shimane Prefecture, Ojika Town and Tsushima City in Nagasaki Prefecture, and Sado City in Niigata Prefecture (see Table 1; Map 1). Ama Town was deliberately selected because it is recognized as one of the most successful case of *chiho sosei* [rural revitalization] strategies in contemporary Japan. The degree to which geographical conditions are “disadvantageous” is classified based on the average travel time and expense to the nearest city on Honshu by ferry, the primary mode of transportation for residents, indicating the order in which the remote islands are compared (note that Sado City is disadvantaged compared to local cities of similar size on Honshu).

Map 1 The four remote islands in Japan



Table 2 Four demographic indicators of the four islands

	Population growth rate (2000-2020)	Percentage of young people settled (2020) *1	25-29 influx rate (2020) *2	Percentage of never-married 30-34 (2020)
Ama town	-15%	65%	69%	49%
Ojika town	-39%	33%	47%	44%
Tsushima city	-31%	46%	46%	37%
Sado city	-29%	52%	30%	44%

Source: Japan Census (2000, 2020)

\*1 Population aged 30-34 in 2020 divided by population aged 10-14 in 2000

\*2 Percentage of the 25-29 year-old population in 2020 who lived in a different municipality 5 years earlier

Table 2 presents four demographic measures for these islands, relevant to internal migration. The population growth rate reflects changes over a 20-year span. Despite attracting numerous immigrants

in the past two decades, all islands have experienced population declines due to natural and social decreases surpassing migration. Remarkably, Ama Town has fared comparatively well, given that the overall population change in depopulated areas over the same period was -26% (in fact, Ama's population has remained at about 2300 over the past decade). The "Percentage of young people settled" indicates the extent to which youth population has reproduced (reproduced in terms of population size, not the percentage of the island's native population that has remained) over the same period. The "25-29 influx rate" signifies the proportion of migrants in this age group.

Comparing these measures reveals intriguing insights: Ama boasts the highest percentage of young people settled (65%), contributing to its population stability. Tsushima and Sado have witnessed similar population declines, yet Sado records a higher percentage of young people settled. However, Sado has the lowest influx of young migrants among the islands, suggesting a greater tendency for youths to remain on the island compared to others. Ojika and Tsushima have similar rates of young migrant influx, yet Ojika displays significantly lower percentage of young generation settled. This implies a higher outflux of young people from Ojika, driving its pronounced population decline. Regarding the last column, which denotes the percentage of never-married individuals among 30-34 age group, Ama records the highest rate, while Tsushima shows the lowest. This suggests that many young migrants to Ama are unmarried and may not prioritize family formation, partly due to limited economic prospects. This aligns with Klien's observation that Ama attracts lifestyle migrants in pursuit of self-realization opportunities (Klien, 2020).

Lastly, I introduce a relatively recent education initiative implemented on remote islands: the "Ritou Ryugaku [Remote Islands Study Abroad]" program, introduced in many islands since the early 21st century amidst declining populations. Currently operational in over 40 islands, including the four mentioned, elementary and junior high schools offer such programs. These schools provide unique educational experiences leveraging the island's rich natural settings and community support, attracting families seeking such educational opportunities. In Sado city, two schools situated away from population centers offer study-abroad programs. During an interview in January 2024, a participating school, introducing the program three years ago, reported that over half its students came from outside the island to join the program. The condition for joining the program is that the students must live in the adjacent area with their parents or relatives. Families often relocate, leaving fathers and other members on the mainland partly due to limited island employment opportunities and low wages. Additionally, there are students facing challenges in urban schools, making it necessary for teachers to take careful consideration of them. While the "Remote Island Study Abroad" program can bolster educational infrastructure on declining remote islands, it may involve family separations, particularly where stable employment is scarce. Hence, expanding study-abroad programs on remote islands may not necessarily drive lifestyle migration of intact families seeking better educational opportunities.



## **Policy recommendations**

### **Domestic Migration (Population Movement)**

- Strengthen economic incentives to alleviate the excessive concentration of population in cities and to revitalize rural areas. This should include support for employment, entrepreneurship, and improved childcare services to facilitate work-life balance for individuals.
- Enhance incentives for venture companies and other businesses to establish operations in depopulated areas, particularly targeting the younger generations as potential employees.
- Promote flexibilities in work arrangements, especially among the younger generation, by advocating for remote work options and creating conducive environments for working in rural areas.

### **Urbanization / depopulation**

- Encourage investment and reform the tax system to enhance the attractiveness of local cities and depopulated areas, fostering economic opportunities.
- Strengthen connections between urban and rural areas, facilitating mechanisms for urban residents to support rural communities through short-term stays and financial aid.
- Implement flexible educational formats at public universities, allowing students to study while residing in underpopulated areas.
- Improve the appeal of schools in underpopulated areas by increasing teacher staffing and developing engaging curricula.
- Expand governmental programs such as the Local Vitalization Cooperator (LVC) initiative in depopulated areas to attract new residents, particularly the youth, and enhance economic support and public services to encourage settlement.

### **Family formation**

- Implement policies to support family formation among the younger generation, including enhanced childcare support and initiatives to balance work and family life.
- Provide increased financial assistance to families relocating to rural areas, such as housing allowances, higher child allowances, and support for educational expenses.

## **References**

- Benson, Michaela, and Karen O'Reilly.(2009). Migration and the search for a better way of life: a critical exploration of lifestyle migration. *the sociological review* 57, 4, pp. 608-625.
- Cabinet Office.(2021). Daiyonkai shingata koronawuirusukansensho eikyouta ni okeru ishiki kodo henka ni kansuru chousa [the fourth survey of changing attitudes and Government of Japan, Cabinet Office.] Government of Japan, Cabinet Office.

- [https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai2/wellbeing/covid/pdf/result4\\_covid.pdf](https://www5.cao.go.jp/keizai2/wellbeing/covid/pdf/result4_covid.pdf) (In English)
- Dilley, Luke, Menelaos Gkartzios, and Tokumi Odagiri.(2022). Developing counterurbanisation: Making sense of rural mobility and governance in Japan.
- Fielding, Tony.(2017). Japan: internal migration trends and processes since the 1950s. in T. Champion, T. Cooke and I. Shuttleworth.(Eds.) *Internal Migration in the Developed World* (pp. 173-202). NY: Routledge.
- Ghaznavi, Cyrus, Takayuki Kawashima, Yuta Tanoue, Daisuke Yoneoka, Koji Makiyama, Haruka Sakamoto, Peter Ueda, Akifumi Eguchi, and Shuhei Nomura. (2022). Changes in marriage, divorce and births during the COVID-19 pandemic in *Japan*.
- Hattori, Keiro, Kiyonobu Kaido, and Mihoko Matsuyuki.(2017). The development of urban shrinkage discourse and policy response in *Japan*.
- Hein, Patrick. (2012). Does ethnic origin determine integration success? A comparison of immigration policies in Germany and Japan. *Asian Ethnicity* 13, 2, pp. 161-185.
- Ishikawa, Y. (2016). Nihon no kokunai intai ido saikou [Internal retirement migration revisited]. *Kyoto Daigaku Bungakubu Kenkyu Kiyō* [*Memoirs of the Faculty of Letters, Kyoto University*], 55, pp. 135-166.
- Ishikawa, Yoshitaka.(2020). Internal migration in Japan. In M. Bell, A. Bernard, E. Charles-Edwards and Y. Zhu (Eds.) *Internal migration in the countries of Asia: A cross-national Comparison* (pp. 113-136). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- JOIN.(2023). Reiwa 4 nendo chiiki okoshi kyoryokutai ni kansuru chosa [*FY2022 Survey on Local Vitalization Cooperator, Survey Research Report*]. Japan Organization for Internal Migration. [https://www.iju-join.jp/f-join/r4\\_syousai.pdf](https://www.iju-join.jp/f-join/r4_syousai.pdf) (in Japanese)
- Klien, Susanne. (2020). *Urban migrants in rural Japan: Between agency and anomie in a post-growth society*.
- Komine, Ayako.(2018). A closed immigration country: revisiting Japan as a negative case. *international migration* 56, 5, pp. 106-122.
- Kotsubo, Masaki, and Tomoki Nakaya.(2023). Trends in internal migration in Japan, 2012-2020: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Population, Space and Place* 29, 4: e34 .
- MIC. (2023). Reiwa 4 nendo ni okeru iju soudan ni kansuru chosa kekka [results of survey on migration consultation in fiscal 2022]. Japanese Ministry of internal Affairs and communication. [https://www.soumu.go.jp/main\\_content/000912268.pdf](https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000912268.pdf) (In Japanese)
- Shinkawa, Toshimitsu.(2012). Substitutes for Immigrants? Social Policy Responses to Population Decreases in Japan. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56,8, pp.1123-1138.
- Trask, Bahira Sherif.(2022). Migration, urbanization, and the family dimension. *Division for Inclusive Social Development, Focal Point on the Family*.
- Tsuya, Noriko.(2014). The impacts of population decline in Japan: demographic prospects and policy

implications.

Yamamoto, Tsutomu.(2017). Jinko kanryu to kaso nousanson no shakaigaku [*sociology of population U-turn and depopulated rural districts*]. Tokyo: Gakubunsha.

Zollet, S., & Qu, M. (2024). Revitalising rural areas through counterurbanisation: Community-oriented policies for the settlement of urban newcomers. *Habitat International*, 145, 103022.