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Master thesis

(De)growth Out of Decay:

Re-imagining rural Japan to create a sustainable post-growth future

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Abstract:

Japan is a "super-aged" society with 28% of the population over the age of 65 years old. Once the second largest economy in the world and now the third, Japan has been a neoliberal model of economic development. Yet, despite Japan reaching high economic wealth through the process of capital accumulation the nation has found itself with a population that is feeling precarious. Today the country is experiencing unprecedented accelerated depopulation and economic stagnation. In particular, the issue of depopulation resulting in abandoned places has had consequential impacts in shaping rural Japan as a site of decay. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic we are witnessing urban decentralization and migration into rural areas. As urban migrants move to rural villages, these areas have become an urgent zone for people to mobilize around creating alternative ways of living and futures centered around sustainability.

Based on 6 months of multi-sited fieldwork in rural Japan, I examine the ways in which the *inaka* (Japanese countryside) has become a key site for experimentation in alternative ways of living, aligned to degrowth values in Japanese society. How is rurality being reimagined in contemporary Japan? What new relations and systems are emerging out of capitalist decay in depopulated villages? How have visions of a prosperous future changed from post-war to post-growth Japan? In this thesis, I trace *relations of revitalization*, by this I mean the dialectical relationship between decay and rebirth, in which conditions of decay provide opportunity and potential for post-growth living that breaks away from neoliberal values. Although scholars have called for degrowth by design, I argue that *degrowth out of decay* is also worthy of attention to better understand the ways in which opportunities for degrowth are often messy and complex negotiations within existing capitalist realities. As villagers attempt to break away from the ideology of capitalist growth, I show degrowth not only as a process of downscaling, but also in relation to the emergence of new forms of growth. I show how rural revitalization is a practice of future-making guided by local governments and urban migrants with reorientated values to create a sustainable post-growth future for both humans and nonhumans to dwell in.

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Seeds of Rebirth and Healing: Planting Totoro's seeds in a post-growth Japan

"What a beautiful tree. This tree must have stood here for years and years. In the ancient past, humans and trees used to be good friends." -father in *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988)

Figure 1. Wooden totoro

When I first arrived in the rural village of Nishiawakura located in the mountains of Okayama, Japan, I came across a number of wooden totoro. A Totoro is a forest spirit creature, and a figure popularized by the 1988 film *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbor Totoro). Tonari no Totoro was my favorite Japanese film as a child. Set in the 1950s, it tells the story of a family that moves to the *inaka* (countryside) where the young daughters have a fantastical encounter with their neighbor Totoro, a forest spirit. In the film, Totoro is depicted as a mix of a rabbit-cat-racoon with mottled fur, and, more importantly, as a figure that is connected to the more-than-human world. In Nishiawakura, life-sized wooden Totoro greeted me in various places in the village, such as in front of the coin laundry station and residents' homes. Each Totoro had different facial expressions and were painted in the same gray blue hues, adorned with iron whiskers. The Totoro figures transported me back to my childhood. During my visits from the United States to Japan as a child, I distinctly remember the trees standing tall and high like skyscrapers densely packed around the winding road on the way to my grandma's home. I

fondly referred to this forest scenery as “Totoro no ki da” (the trees of Totoro). I returned from those trips with the impression that Japan was full of forests where benevolent forest spirit creatures resided.

One scene from the film in particular stuck out to me: the Totoro gives acorns to the girls and together they plant them into the soil and encourage the acorns to grow into trees. The tree seedlings result in the growth of a mushroom-cloud shaped forest representing life and abundance, very much a contrast and possible replacement of the traumatic images of Japan’s atomic clouds when the United States dropped bombs on the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The forest in the film shows an alternative post-war future based on healing specifically through the nurturing of a harmonious relationship between humans, trees, and living creatures. Specifically, the planting efforts of the girls and Totoro result in the growth of a healthy deciduous forest.

The Totoro forest is a stark juxtaposition to Japan’s post-war monoculture forests, the result of rebuilding efforts focused on capitalist growth as the guiding principle for progress. As I returned to Japan as an adult for fieldwork and stood amongst the trees, the forest was no longer the enchanting image I remembered as a child. What I saw instead was a forest that was dark, its trees skinny and many of them half dead. Anna Tsing and her colleagues (2019: 193) write that hope in the Anthropocene is “patchy” or uneven because “capitalist and ecological structures themselves are patchy.” The Totoro acts as a symbol of hope; a patchy ecological reminder that humans are not the only inhabitants of the village, but also markers of a possible utopia based on hope for economic, spiritual, and collective revitalization within a more-than-human world. It is within such ecological ruins of depopulated mountain villages that new seeds of hope are being planted, namely through patchy revitalization activities.

This thesis is based on six months of multi-sited fieldwork primarily in two rural villages: Kamikatsu, which is located in Tokushima Prefecture on the island of Shikoku, and Nishiawakura in Okayama Prefecture on the western part Honshu, Japan’s main island. In this thesis, I show how rural revitalization is a practice of *future-making* guided by local governments and urban migrants who seek to create a sustainable post-growth future for both humans and nonhumans to dwell in. The urban migrants I spoke with were responding to the limits of Japan’s capitalism, and its boom-bust dynamics. Many left major cities to move to depopulated villages with the hopes of experimenting with nature, economy, and social relations describing the

failures of capitalism while working with alternative models of living. My key questions guiding this thesis are: How is rurality being reimagined in contemporary Japan? What new relations and systems are emerging out of capitalist decay in depopulated villages? How have visions of a prosperous future changed from post-war to post-growth Japan?

Satoyama in Decay

With the highest proportion of elderly citizens globally, compounded by very low fertility rates, Japan is a "super-aged" society. The two demographic processes have accelerated depopulation across the country. Depopulation is most visible in the countryside. An increasing number of rural communities are now characterized as marginal village (*genkai shuraku)*, where 50% of the population or more is over 65 years old. Some villages will also cease to exist because of depopulation and declining fertility. According to one estimate (Masuda 2014), nearly 900 are expected to vanish by 2040. The depopulation of rural villages have raised questions around ownership of abandoned homes, forests, and farmland and how to manage them. Because these issues are so widespread in the *inaka* or countryside, they are the most urgent there too. In response to depopulation, local municipalities are promoting regional revitalization of depopulated rural regions with the aim of attracting urbanites to relocate to their villages. Both Kamikatsu and Nishiawakura are depopulated villages with similar population sizes approximating 1,400 residents. A high percentage of each village's residents is elderly. Over 50% of the population in Kamikatsu is over the age of 65. In Nishiawakura, 37% of the population is 65 years old or older. These have created crisis conditions for abandonment, and decay. At the same time, both villages have taken their own paths towards revitalization. Kamikatsu's revitalization efforts are centered around a Zero Waste Initiative based on a forty-five category community waste separation system. In Nishiawakura, revitalization activities are focused on what it calls the 100 Year Forest Initiative to revive the village through forest management by shifting privately owned forest to the care of the village government.

Because Kamikatsu and Nishiawakura are adjacent to woodlands, their mountain village-landscapes are also called *satoyama*. The *kanji* (Sino-Japanese) character 里 (*sato*) means "village" and 山 (*yama*) means "mountain." Satoyama has been a key site for understanding Japanese concepts of nature (*shizen*) (see Gang and Tsing 2018; Tsing 2015). Today the term satoyama carries multiple meanings especially in relation to traditional landscapes and ecological

sustainability in Japan. The earliest appearance of the term satoyama can be traced to the Edo period in a 1750 book about the Kiso mountain region, located in Nagano, Japan (Takeuchi 2003). As a traditional landscape, a satoyama features terraced rice paddies, secondary forests, farmland, and grassland. As a concept, satoyama in its contemporary use refers to an ecological landscape but one organized through human-nature dynamics: biodiversity is thus primarily dependent on human management of the commons. It is a system in which the well-being of people and nature coexist through relations of care and human disturbance to the landscape. Depopulation and abandonment are consequential then because use, or lack thereof, disrupts symbiotic multi-species relations. Furthermore, due to large scale monoculture tree planting during the postwar period much of the mountains no longer reflect a biodiversity satoyama landscape and instead are primarily monoculture industrial forests. The landscape of both villages are now primarily of decaying monoculture forests.

Anthropologists engaged in studies that concern the Anthropocene, the epoch or conditions characterized by human activity's impact on the planet, have taken up this contradiction by studying the intersections between capitalism, ecology, multi-species relations, and environmental devastation (Tsing 2015; Haraway et al. 2016; Tsing et al. 2017; Latour et al 2018). In *Arts of Living On A Damaged Planet*, the authors claim that we face pressures to "keep moving forward, to get the newer model, to have more babies, to get bigger" at the cost of the health of our planet to achieve "dreamworlds of progress" (Tsing et al 2017: 2). The environmental degradation of the satoyama is the result of the pursuit of economic growth and progress, but unique in that *underuse* hinders its biodiversity. I situate my project on depopulated villages within these current anthropological debates concerning the Anthropocene, but I also frame my project along lines of inquiry in the discourse on degrowth to examine revitalization in relation to post-growth futures.

(De)growth

Degrowth argues for sustainability, and one that entails a shift towards a "democratic and redistributive downscaling of the biophysical size of the global economy" (Asara et al. 2015: 375). Thus, degrowth supporters question mainstream notions of sustainability such as "green growth" or "sustainable development" because it still relies on the premise of growth and a reliance on its metrics such as gross domestic product (GDP). Degrowth scholars call for the

"decolonization of public debates from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective" (D'Alisa et al. 2015: 3). Discussions in degrowth assert ideas about well-being, happiness, simplicity, conviviality, and the commons at the forefront of sustainability debates and to conceive a good life that is attuned to ecological limits (Kallis et al. 2012; Buchs and Koch 2019; Kallis et al. 2020). However, the conversation of degrowth has primarily emerged from Western countries such as Italy, France, Greece, United States, and Spain which have gone through multiple financial and societal crises, austerity, industrial pollution, and inequality. There is a clear opportunity and need to engage in degrowth outside of the West, which will result in new contributions and forms of knowledge within the degrowth movement and questions about models of the economy that may or may not displace capitalism as we know it.

In this thesis, I trace *relations of revitalization*, by which I mean the dialectical relationship between decay and rebirth, in which conditions of decay provide opportunity for post-growth living that breaks away from neoliberal values. Although scholars have called for degrowth by design (see Kallis et al; Victor 2008), I argue that (*de)growth out of decay* is also worthy of attention to better understand the ways in which opportunities for degrowth are often messy and complex negotiations within existing capitalist realities. Degrowth is a social movement and theoretical position that critiques economic growth and capitalism, while calling for alternative imaginaries that challenge us to think of what sustainable living can look like without capitalist growth. In particular, I show the ways in which rural Japan is no longer a static place for sedentary ways of living, conservative values, and traditions in ways that still dominate popular and scholarly writings, but instead how it is imagined as a place of experimentation. The varying experiments have resulted in emerging social relations guided by non-capitalist values to foster new notions of a good life in the countryside. However, my use of parentheses in (de)growth is to attend to the nuance of degrowth as it unfolds on the ground; not as a complete break from growth or absent of growth. Rather, rural revitalization activities led by urban migrants are reshaping the meaning of growth in new ways that challenge the linear notion of capitalist growth with happiness. For example, as urban migrants move to rural villages they metaphorically and literally plant the seeds for new forms of growth that are often embedded in circular rather than linear logics, as they attempt to revitalize local village economies and repair damaged landscapes.

These seeds were evident to me when I came across a village hall meeting in Nishiawakura where residents were discussing the topic of degrowth. In September of 2021, the urban migrants of the village talked about *"datsu-seicho"* (degrowth) based on the following questions: Can Nishiawakura create degrowth growth (*datsu-seicho seicho)*? The panel included Saito Kohei, a young Marxist scholar and philosopher in his mid-30s. During the pandemic, Kohei-san published the book, *Capital in the Anthropocene,* which became a best-seller in Japan with more than half a million copies sold (McCurry 2022). Many urban migrants I met had indeed read his book. Kohei-san described the combination of growing up in Tokyo, the Lehman Shock of 2008, and the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster as reasons for his interest in Marx to tackle issues of inequality. In the meeting he stated:

> I experienced the effects of the Lehman shock and nuclear disaster, so for my generation it is difficult to say capitalism is a good system. Is it really *yutaka* [prosperous]? The dreams of the bubble period [a reference to the 1980s] have burst and now we have growing inequality. The future is unclear. Isn't a system that moves away from capitalism better in order to make a happier place for all? Capitalism has failed us.
>
> It is difficult to create economic growth with depopulation. I think the risk is high if we try to keep increasing the GDP when we have the issue of depopulation. The current economy is not sustainable. Economic growth and profit keeps the economy running and this is how *shinhonshugi* [capitalism] operates. It is an exercise of generating capital [*shihon*] which controls society. For capital to grow, we must work more, we keep consuming, and increasing our use of energy. We are swallowed in this cycle. *Datsu-seicho* [degrowth] is the downscaling of the economy and the creation of a break in the economy to slow down. The GDP may not grow but we might have a more prosperous way of living [*yutaka no seikatsu*].

Much like Kohei-san, I found that urban migrants in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, were interested in pushing back against a hyper capitalist growth model attributed to Japan's success and downfall. But, Kohei-san admitted that depopulated villages like Nishiawakura needed growth. What was apparent to me was that the discussion here in the village with Kohei-san was a reimagining of growth. Kohei-san continued on:

> How much money do we really need to live? People in cities need to change their lifestyles. People living in the big city don't have the sense of *kansei* [a sensitivity

> relating to conscious awareness] to *shizen* [nature]. We don't have *kansei* to treat *shizen* as precious, but if you have that experience with shizen I think our relations will change. Do not copy the growth of Tokyo, there is no point. Don't look at what you don't have, but appreciate what you do have. If a Tokyoite comes here, they might even find cutting weeds *tanoshi* [enjoyable]. That is a strength I believe in finding joy.

When the floor opened up for discussion, urban migrants echoed many of Kohei-san's points, voicing their disillusionment with capitalism. This is perhaps in no way surprising as these were the very urban migrants who had left Tokyo and other major cities, moving to villages beset with declining populations in a movement that has gained popularity over the last decade, and a process accelerated by the coronavirus pandemic. In a sense, Kohei-san was preaching to the choir: these urban migrants had made the *turn* to depopulated rural villages as a way to experiment in alternative ways of living in hopes of a sustainable future not guided by capitalist growth as a way to heal themselves and damaged landscapes. Similar to Tsing's (2015) work on "collaborative survival," this thesis examines rural Japan not only as a story of decay and ruin –a story that has been told since the 1990s when the economy began to decline– but also a tale of hope and possibility being forged in the very depopulated villages most severely affected by Japan's boom-bust cycles. The promise of this tale is the possibilities that come with visions of a multispecies post-growth future.

Recently, scholars writing on Japan are reframing depopulation and shrinkage as an opportunity to rethink our neoliberal economic growth paradigm that has caused environmental degradation, precarity, and harm to our well-being (Rupprecht 2017; LeBlanc 2019; Matanle and Saez-Perez 2019). Matanle and Saez-Perez (2019) argue that depopulation can potentially create social and environmental benefits to society, what he calls a "depopulation dividend." In Susanne Klien's (2020) ethnography on urban migrants in rural Japan, she brings to attention depopulated rural villages as sites for "communities of hope." Depopulation naturally creates the conditions to study downscaling and the opportunity to study emerging relations between humans and non-humans, non-capitalist economic practices, and well-being. Recent studies on rural Japan signal a break from "quantitative national growth policies" and instead a shift towards "qualitative local growth" (Chiavacci and Hommerich 2017) by local governments and from capitalist to post-capitalist lifestyles (Klien 2020). Even the term "satoyama capitalism" has been coined by Japanese economists, which calls for moving beyond money capitalism towards

an alternative economic model based on the reuse of existing resources and ecological values of the satoyama (Motani 2017).

During my fieldwork in Nishiawakura, the village received an award for "Satoyama Capitalism" because of the village's work in reimagining decaying forests into new value. However, value was not only assigned in economic terms, but was also thought of in relation to increasing well-being of humans and non-humans to create a prosperous future that was oriented at a collective scale to include other species. It was clear during my time in both villages that local governments and residents were taking new approaches towards growth and sustainability guided by degrowth values, but never completely separated from growth.

New Futures in Post-growth Japan

In the fall of 2019, I sat at my home in California scrolling through the daily news on my computer and reading about a new virus spreading through China. At the time I was not very alarmed as I had become accustomed to precarity as part of everyday living and continued to scroll through the next series of articles. However, over the next months the virus spread and chatter about the Covid-19 virus was picking up as cases popped up in the United States. Everyone's lives were quickly thrown into chaos under the global Covid-19 pandemic. It was during this period that many, including myself, started to rethink current ways of living. Talks of Universal Basic Income suddenly were no longer fringe ideas, but entering mainstream debates in public policy (Nettle et al. 2021). During lockdowns across the U.S, people were more rooted at home and picking up interests such as bread baking, gardening, and gaining a newfound appreciation for green spaces. Many companies shifted to remote working policies, shaping the ways people worked and where people could reside. And as for myself, I found that the density of cities was no longer attractive to me for fieldwork, and instead I became curious about rural areas. A number of NHK-World Japan articles and broadcasted programs came out during this period about urban migrants moving out of cities, such as Tokyo, to rural areas in Japan (NHK 2020). With the shift towards remote working, people were no longer tied down to urban centers and decentralization seemed to be a possibility more than ever. It is often in times of crisis and disaster that displays of resilience, healing, and rethinking of current ways of living come to the forefront. Although rural revitalization in Japan has been an ongoing movement even prior to the pandemic, it seemed an especially opportune time for me to turn my attention to rural Japan as a

site for ethnographic inquiry to examine how rural Japan had become an urgent zone for people to mobilize around anxieties around sustainability and the future accelerated by the pandemic.

Precarity has become synonymous with contemporary living in post-growth Japan. Since the 1990s, Japan has faced a stagnant economy after the burst of the bubble, which ended Japan's miracle period of high economic growth from the 1950s to late 1980s. Once a nation revered as a successful model for economic growth and development, Japan has become "the problem case of stagnation" (Chiavacci and Hommerich 2017). Once the second largest economy after the US, Japan is currently the world's third largest economy following China's rise. Rankings aside, the country has experienced economic stagnation, non-regular employment, a shrinking and aging population, and multiple environmental crises. Most notably the 2008 Lehman shock caused an economic crisis for Japan, a highly export dependent economy, followed soon after by the 2011 Great Eastern Japan Disaster which resulted in an earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown. Anne Allison (2013) notes that "social precarity", a sense of insecurity and social detachment, has become part of everyday life in Japan, coining the phrase "precarious Japan". Since the late 1980s, the Japanese government has reported up to 2 million *hikikomori,* which are Japanese youth who withdraw into long term social isolation in their rooms out of anxiety. The emergence of the *hikikomori* condition has been explained as a result of "Japan's competitive capitalist social expectations" (Ismail 2020). Historian of Japan, Andrew Gordon (2017), notes that the rise of "non-regular work" such as part-time workers and contract employees with limited opportunities for career advancement and higher wages has also contributed to a precarious Japan. Recent data show that more than a third of the Japanese workforce is working in non-regular work (Nippon 2018). In Japan's rapidly aging society, reports of *kodokushi* (lonely deaths) of elderly going unnoticed for years has become common news in cities (Otani 2012). Businesses part of Japan's "healing boom" such as cat cafes, maid cafes, and robotic pets, capitalize on people's urban loneliness and anxieties through affective labor which promises to provide belonging and intimacy in its absence (Plourde 2014). On the topic of rural Japan, Klien's (2015, 2019, 2020) ethnographic research on the recent urban to rural migration trend highlights that it is out of the conditions of a precarious Japan that we see cohorts of "lifestyle migrants" emerge and move out of cities, such as Tokyo, to the countryside in order to seek out alternative lifestyles.

It is clear that precarity in Japan is directly linked to crises and disasters in Japanese history, but also to competing debates about reconstruction and renewal. Although at the global scale we have entered what many refer to as a "post-Covid" era, this does not mean the end of the global Covid-19 pandemic, rather that we have entered a new period in which the virus has become part of everyday life and our new norm. Thus, I use the affix "post" not to indicate the clear ending of a crisis, but rather a new normal shaped by crisis and disaster in which alternative imaginaries and relations emerge in a post-era. And as we enter the post-Covid era, I am reminded that for Japan the idea of a "post" reality and future is already deeply ingrained in Japan's post-war history and connected to the emergence of alternative movements. This is especially evident in the literature on post-disasters in Japan and the emergence of civic volunteerism (Avenell 2016; Tatsuki 2000), activism (Aldrich 2012; Brown and Mackie 2015), and socially-engaged art (Dimmer 2016). For example, scholars writing on civic volunteerism in Japan trace the reinvigorated volunteerism in Japan to the 1995 Kobe earthquake. Tatsuki (2000) highlights that following the Kobe earthquake a sense of "self-governance" and "community solidarity" emerged resulting in a "renaissance in volunteerism" in Japan. Avenell (2016) argues that the volunteerism in the aftermath of the Kobe earthquake showed the "progressive possibilities of the local" in which volunteers challenged the limitations of the neoliberal state. For example, volunteers re-imagined citizenship in postwar Japan through volunteer participation by vulnerable minority groups excluded from citizenship at the state level (Avenell 2016).

Scholars writing on the Great Eastern Japan Disaster of 2011, also referred to as 3.11 (*san-ichi-ichi*), have highlighted that debates about Japan's rebirth (*saisei*) as a stagnant nation entered Japanese national discourse following the disaster (Samuels 2013). However, there are competing narratives about Japan's "turning point" as a nation in relation to disaster that point to a division in values and visions for the future of Japan (Mullins and Koichi 2016). Local governments have shifted away from GDP indicators for progress towards well-being as a new socio-economic metric. For example, in 2013 The Association of Municipalities for Improving Residents' Sense of Well-Being also called the Happiness League was formed across 1,742 municipalities in Japan with the declaration for "resident-centered municipality management to build inclusive and tight-knit local communities" (JFS 2013). Well-being indexes such as Local Hope Index, Sapporo Smile Index, Aggregate Kumamoto Happiness, Niigata City's Net Personal

Happiness, Himi City's Kokoro (heart) Index, and the Gross Awarakara Happiness Index are some of the local well-being measures implemented (ISHES 2012).

In rural areas, revitalization activities date back to the 1990s, however, the 3.11 disaster was an especially propelling force. Dimmer (2016) argues that 3.11 was key in the emergence of alternative place-making practices in which art and design were used for post-disaster recovery and rebuilding in rural areas. He shows that design practices following 3.11 embraced principles such as "*kizuna* (social bond), *komyuniti* (community), *tsunagu* (connecting)" which shaped socially driven design practices in a post-disaster and post-growth Japan (Dimmer 2016: 201). These principles are still relevant to rural revitalization activities today and the ways localism is conceived. Although progressive change did *not* occur within national state institutions and policies, a continued theme is evident in the literature on post-disaster Japan in which social crises have led to progressive transformations at *local* scales and sites.

In particular, I am interested in the utopic imaginaries and futures emerging out of rural Japan, a site of significant decay and crisis. I examine rural revitalization as situated within the dialectical relations between decay and rebirth. On the usefulness of dialectics, David Harvey (2000: 241) states dialectics "teaches that universalility always exists *in relation* to particularity: neither can be separated from the other even though they are distinctive moments within our conceptual operations and practical engagements." I view the rebirth of rural villages into "spaces of hope" (Harvey 2000) as in a dialectical tension and relation to capitalist decay. My project is situated within these larger debates on post-growth Japan to examine the intersections between crisis, decay, and revitalization. I turn my attention to rural Japan to examine the ways in which depopulated rural villages are key localities as sites for experimentation in narratives of a post-growth Japan. I show that rural revitalization is an act of future-making within capitalist decay as depopulated villages transform into "spaces of hope" guided by new values.

Methods and Ethics

This thesis is based on six months of multi-sited fieldwork in Kamikatsu and Nishiawakura, but also informed by my experiences in neighboring villages and cities. I find the term "interrogative boundary" (Madden 2010) a salient reminder that the construction of my fieldsite is not just about locating myself in a geographic position, rather it is a way to set relevant boundaries around why I need to "be there" in relation to what I want to inquire into and

what forms of knowledge will be produced. Mobility was key to understanding the lives of urban migrants, thus instead of viewing the "field" as a single-sited geographic location I took a multi-sited approach. I followed the lives of urban migrants in their villages, but also outside of villages into cities, such as for grocery shopping and leisure. Multi-sited fieldwork shows that cultural formation exists in and between multiple sites (Madden 2010; Marcus 1995; Passaro 1997). My multi-sited approach allows me to better understand issues of depopulation, migration, and rural revitalization that would not have been tracked if I conceptualized the fieldsite into a single village. I use a multi-sited framework as coined by Marcus (1995: 106) to track the "chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of location." The field is a construct that is "part geographic, part social, and part mental" that allows for multiple "modes of construction" in our methods (Madden 2010; Marcus 1995).

The technique of "following" (Marcus 1995) is especially relevant to my methods. I "followed" urban migrants and locations, but also memories and life histories. I started my fieldwork in Kamikatsu for 3 months, but as I followed the story of revitalization it also led me to the village of Nishiawakura. Both Kamikatsu and Nishiwakura were reliant on the forestry industry and now have similar populations, however, they have taken different focuses for revitalization. During my time in Kamikatsu, many urban migrants had mentioned Nishiawakura as the "hotspot" for rural revitalization activity, thus I followed this recurring theme and later went to Nishiawakura. I was able to see juxtapositions between age cohorts, gender, and place by taking a multi-sited approach. The multi-sited approach has allowed me to understand the changing role of rurality in contemporary Japan within the dynamics of urban and rural linkages.

My entry into Kamikatsu was arranged through the Kamikatsu Zero Waste Hotel and Center after a series of emails. After zooming with their staff member, Tomoko, we agreed on an arrangement in which I would be a paid intern for the Zero Waste Hotel and Center in which I worked three days a week and more if needed for busy holidays. Tomoko put me in touch with Nana, an urban migrant from North America who had recently moved to the village. Nana welcomed me as her first roommate in Kamikatsu. I arrived in the late spring of 2021 in Kamikatsu from California and spent three months living and working in the village. Kamikatsu's revitalization plan was largely focused on the Zero Waste Initiative. The village has 45 categories of waste separation, which I participated in. My daily life involved sorting trash, volunteering at the community waste center, and interning at the Zero Waste Hotel and Center.

During my stay in the village, a rural revitalization consultant doing work in Kamikatsu had contacts in Nishiawakura and introduced me to a shared house in Nishiawakura. In August 2021, I moved to Nishiawakura where I spent three months and lived in a shared house with other female urban migrants. Nishiawakura's revitalization is centered around their 100 Year Forest Initiative, which was especially valuable to situate my project within larger questions relating to multispecies relations.

Jennifer Robertson (2002: 791) compares the "reflexivity" of an anthropologist to an internal "barometer" to track "the labeling and mirroring practices of others and be attentive to how such contingencies shape her or his project." My positionality as a young woman with a Japanese American background provided a sense of familiarity with residents, especially with young newcomers to the village who were mostly in their 20s and 30s. Urban migrants who move to rural villages are referred to as *ijusha* in Japanese. During my fieldwork, the following terms were commonly used by my interlocutors to denote a village resident's migration pattern and relation to the town: *U-turn* (a resident who moves back to their rural hometown from the city), *I-turn* (a resident who is not originally from the town), and *mago-turn* (grandchild who relocates to their grandparents rural hometown). Many interlocutors had made an I-turn to the villages. My own *position* was similar to I-turners because we all had no connection to the villages and came from cities. I stayed reflexive about my relation to the village which was similar to that of an I-turn migrant. For example, I formed close relations with an elderly couple in Nishiawakura who invited me to live at their home. I helped with daily household tasks, ate together, and was treated as part of their family. This form of "adoption" of I-turners by locals in the village was quite common. The I-tuner positionality allowed me to better understand the ways in which having no connection to the village provided a different set of challenges and opportunities different to U-turn migrants who had existing ties to the villages.

Tom Boellstorff (2008) points out that "culture is lived out in the mundane and the ordinary," thus participant-observation allowed me to understand culture through everyday interactions of living in rural Japan. Boellstorff and his colleagues (2012: 65) define *participant observation* as "the embodied emplacement of the researching self in a fieldsite as a consequential social actor." I immersed myself in everyday life in the villages while navigating their ruins, such as abandoned forests, houses, farm land, and schools. Ethnographies such as Jo Vergust's (2010) study on the rhythms of walking in city streets and Andrew Matthews' (2022)

technique of walking in forests have informed my fieldwork practices in which walking became a valuable way to experience rural landscapes and sensorial qualities. Bourdieu (1977: 90) notes that "space is the text the body reads by traversing", and I found the practice of walking a productive method. My participant-observation included taking walks with villagers in forests, which allowed me to see forests as "anthropocene patches" (Tsing et al. 2019) within the larger village landscape. This was especially helpful in understanding forests in relation to different temporal trajectories which revealed stories of loss, hope, and change. I also participated in many aspects of village life including Kamikatsu's local waste separation system, sharing meals with residents, farming, beekeeping, children education events, and Nishiawakura's forestry events.

Photography was also a vital part of my fieldwork as a way to capture the sensorial qualities and signs of both life and decay in the villages. It also allowed me to visualize places cared for and places abandoned. Trudi Smith (2007) describes photography as an "embodied practice" and art as a "sensual practice" that allows for new knowledge production. Anthropologists have used photography and other art practice, such as drawing, especially in tracking the transformation of landscapes over time (Matthews 2022; Smith 2007; Tsing and Bazzul 2022). I was attracted to material expressions of decay, which was sometimes hard for for me to put into words. Thus, I use my photographs in this thesis not only as as illustrations, but as a way to convey affective atmospheres and moods difficult to express through words.

My participant-observation was supplemented with a total of 50 semi-structured interviews, which allowed my interlocutors to expand in depth upon themes under study and clarify questions that arose during participant observation. I interviewed elderly, urban migrants, government staff in the villages, local entrepreneurs, and residents involved in forestry and farming. In Kamikatsu, I was able to recruit participants for my study through residents I encountered during my internship. A rural revitalization volunteer working at the local hot spring in Kamikatsu was especially helpful and key in helping me to connect with elderly residents in the village to interview. In Nishiawakura, I used the village library's event board to post a flier detailing my research project as a way to connect with villagers for my study. A QR code on my flier allowed residents to sign up for my weekly focus groups, which I held in the library.

Many connections with urban migrants new to the village came about through my posted event flier. I did not have a car which also made it difficult to navigate in the villages. However, by using the local bus, volunteer taxi service, and riding my bicycle I was able to have

serendipitous encounters especially with elderly who also used such services. Interviews were held in various places such as homes, offices, libraries, and cafes in the villages. Typically interviews lasted at least an hour or longer. Following interviews I was often invited to events and activities by my interlocutors.

The majority of my interviews were conducted in Japanese. Some interlocutors spoke English and in this case we spoke a mix of English and Japanese. I would like to note that my Japanese is at a conversational level and I cannot read or write much Japanese. Many terms relating to rural revitalization were new to my Japanese vocabulary and I would ask interlocutors to explain Japanese terms I was unfamiliar with. Furthermore, elderly in the villages had strong regional accents which were difficult even for native Japanese speakers to understand. During interviews with elderly residents, I brought a native speaker with me for support and to make the elderly feel more comfortable with meeting a foreigner. However, usually upon our meeting they saw that I was part Japanese and looked Japanese which made them feel more at ease because I felt more familiar to them. All interviews were recorded on my electronic device in which I received permission by my interlocutors to record audio. Having audio recordings has also helped with some of the language limitations because I have been able to playback parts that were difficult to fully understand at the time.

On the topic of ethics, I believe Covid-19 was a major source of concern in how to safely navigate conducting fieldwork during a global pandemic and especially in villages with high elderly populations. The Covid-19 vaccines were not yet available to me when I started my fieldwork. Part way through my fieldwork I was able to receive the covid vaccine. Some elderly did not wear masks, however, those interviews were conducted outside. Masking was part of my routine during fieldwork to protect myself and residents in the community. I was fortunate that none of my close contacts were infected with Covid-19.

This project has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data and my securely stored data is anonymized as far as possible. I have used pseudonyms in place of real names in my thesis as a way to protect the identity of interlocutors, except for a key figure who has written books and is frequently in the media. I have received permission to use his real name. The real names of villages are used, which was supported by my interlocutors over the use of village pseudonyms. I received oral consent from interlocutors to participate in my study and they were given my contact information to reach out to me. This thesis will be shared back to

interlocutors as a digital copy. I am also creating a visual magazine based on this study to share with interlocutors who do not read English as a way to give back to the community.

Thesis Roadmap:

In Chapter 2, I examine Japan's state-led post-war tree planting boom in which rural mountain villagers and trees became key actors in post-war reconstruction. It was during the post-war period that Japan's barren landscapes after the war were transformed into green monoculture forests. I focus on how particular tree species, *sugi* (Japanese cedar) and *hinoki* (Japanese cypress), became entangled in Japan's high economic growth period in which rural villagers believed monoculture planting would result in a more prosperous (*yutaka*) future based on individual financial wealth. I show the ways in which this promise was broken, resulting in one of the major triggers for rural depopulation.

In Chapter 3, I turn my attention to the affective experiences of living in urban Japan to unveil the way in which urban migrants felt deeply alienated. I point towards the larger trend of late-capitalist societies, such as Japan, and the problem of what I call a *crisis of meaning* in which people are feeling precarious, fatigued, and lonely. Although, the "good life" in contemporary Japan has largely become associated with working and residing in a city, such as Tokyo, this was no longer the case as urban migrants felt increasingly alienated and disillusioned by capitalism. It was from this separation of self and from others that urban migrants were compelled to move to rural Japan in search of more meaningful ways of living.

Chapter 4 continues on the theme of the good life by focusing on the lifestyles of urban migrants and the emergence of degrowth values. Happiness and well-being have become key guiding factors for village governments and villagers. Ideas around notions of a "good life" and "what is enough" are key to degrowth imaginaries that seek out alternatives to the capitalist model of growth (Skidelsky and Skidelsky 2013). I show the ways in which urban migrants are engaged in meaning-making practices in rural villages as they craft new ways of living to reconnect with feelings of fulfillment and joy.

In Chapter 5, I return to the theme of prosperity (*yutaka*) and forests by focusing on rural revitalization activities in Nishiawakura. I examine the village's 100 Year Forest Initiative as an indicator of how prosperity is being reworked on more collective scales that entail multi-species collaboration. As villagers attempt to revive the local economy and repair a damaged landscape,

I show that such future-making practices are always open ended, feral, and precarious. Finally, I conclude the thesis with an epilogue that returns to the story of Totoro.

Chapter 2.
Post-war Tree Planting for a Prosperous Future

In this chapter, I track the politics of the tree in Japanese history to examine a broken post-war promise of prosperity to rural families that emerged out of state-led reforestation and its the consequences. Residents often used the term *yutaka* which loosely translates to prosperity and abundance. According to the *kanji* (Sino-Japanese) character 豊 (*yuta)* in the word *yutaka* (豊か) holds many meanings related to prosperity, abundance, bountiful, and wealth. However, according to my interlocutors who spoke about post-war tree planting the term was defined as financial prosperity. Analytically, I use *yutaka* as a way to think about tree planting in relation to Japan's larger political economy. I trace Japan's rapid economic rise to its decline as a post-growth nation through the story of post-war tree planting. Drawing on my conversations and forest walks with elderly village residents, I explore their memories of the post-war period in which villagers and trees became key actors in Japan's post-war "reconstruction" which pushed an agenda that prioritized high-speed economic growth.

First, I show that trees in Japan were deeply rooted in debates of modernity, nationalism, and empire expansion that stem back to the Meiji era (1868-1912). State-led reforestation during the Meiji period was a significant historical tipping point in which forestry became centralized under state bureaucracy and forests became a proxy for modernity and wealth. Trees are revered as sacred as Japanese essence, yet are also a commodity of capitalist desire. Post-war tree planting can be seen as a continuation of the Japanese wealth project and expansion that was first preconfigured in the Meiji era.

Next, I explore the ways in which two tree species, *sugi* (Cryptomeria japonica or Japanese cedar) and *hinoki* (Chamaecyparis obtusa or Japanese cypress), became part of a monoculture regime for capitalist growth promoted by the state. By looking at *sugi* and *hinoki* trees, I examine how post-war tree plantings embodied ideological agendas of the state towards an economic model of infinite growth, but this has come at a cost. Aike Rots (2021) examines the relationship between tree plantings, post-disaster reconstruction, and ideological agendas in Japan. Rots shows the ways tree plantings hold "honour, prestige, and authority" in which stakeholders compete for land and push their political interests within debates about the reconstruction of the post-Tsunami region of Tohoku. Rots shows that political agendas become

concealed through tree planting activities that uphold the nationalist rhetoric of Japan as a "forest civilization" (Rots 2021: 6). Similarly, the state-led tree plantings during the post-war period also held symbolic and financial capital that became legitimized under the idea of "reconstruction" for the nation, which concealed the many risks involved with large scale tree planting. Post-war reforestation was embraced by mountain owning families as they saw tree planting as a promise into future private wealth. Elderly residents often used the term *yutaka* to reference dreams of prosperity, in terms of future *financial* wealth, that their families had imagined by planting *sugi* and *hinoki* trees during the post-war period.

Lastly, I examine post-war tree planting by elderly residents as a form of financial speculation in which elderly believed that it would provide economic prosperity for their families and future generations. However, their dream of financial wealth was undercut due to the decline of the domestic forestry industry when the value of *sugi* and *hinoki* dropped. As a result, mountains became burdens. The sudden decline of timber prices resulted in the decline of the forestry industry, which triggered depopulation as villagers left for cities.

Today, the trees planted during the post-war period embody stagnation and decay much like the current state of Japanese economy and society. The hopes and dreams for economic prosperity were projected onto the mountain landscape, as large numbers of rural families during the post-war period planted *sugi* and *hinoki* with the expectation of high financial returns for their families. However, *sugi* and *hinoki* planted during the post-war period became entangled in the logics of capitalism, such as unstable timber markets and foreign imports, resulting in rural villagers being left out of the capitalist dream and thus forests were abandoned. The trees have become capitalist ruins and part of a broken promise under the state for individual financial prosperity in rural Japan, which has resulted in depopulation and abandonment.

However, during my fieldwork I noticed that visions of a *"yutaka"* future have changed from its post-war to post-growth context in rural Japan. No longer is *yutaka* defined in economic terms, rather *yutaka* in relation to rural revitalization is about creating a "sustainable" future that can carry on for both humans and non-humans. The shifting meaning of *yutaka* is key to understanding future-making practices that are transforming depopulated villages into sites of hope for a sustainable future later examined in this thesis.

Meiji Forestry: establishing forestry as process of state-making and empire-building

In Japan the use of reforestation to push the state's agenda under the guise of a "forest loving" country dates back to the Meiji period (Fedmen 2020; Totman 1989). The Meiji era (1868-1912) was a crucial period for the development of "the imperialization of forestry" in which "Japan's forests were freighted with new meaning as building blocks of capitalism, sites of emperor worship, and symbols of national prestige" (Fedman 2020: 25). During the Meiji era trees emerged as important symbols of Japanese nationalism and modernity, but also as resources for state-making and colonial expansion. The Meiji era was when forests were transformed into "frontier resources" (Lien 2020) through state and corporate backing as part of simultaneous nation-state and empire building. Japan scholars have noted that what makes the Japanese imperial project unique and different from Britain or France is that nation-state building happened in tandem with imperial expansion (Hennessey 2018; Uchida 2011).

Jun Uchid (2011: 8), who writes on Japan's colonization of Korean, states "In the late nineteenth century, most European powers were already centuries into the business of exploring the globe and were driven by at least a hundred years of industrial revolution, when Japan launched both processes more or less simultaneously." This can be traced to Japan's seizure of Hokkaido in 1968 and the establishment of Kaitakushi, a colonial development agency in charge of promoting agricultural resettlement with Japanese farmers and exploitation of Hokkaido's forest resources to meet domestic timber demands. Hokkaido became the first experimental site for colonial expansion through forestry. The Meiji state then lured in Japanese corporations to control Hokkaido's forests through a land-leasing system as a way to outsource government forestry operations (Fedmen 2020: 41). Sakhalin island or what was called Karafuto Prefecture became part of Japan's territory in 1905 also became a key site for forestry and corporate involvement for the extraction of pulp for paper production. A timber market supply chain emerged with corporations aligned to the state working hand in hand in which "supply chains grew tandem with empire" (Fedmen 2020: 44). Forests became vital for the development of the Japanese economy and territorial expansion, thus forests became symbols of progress for the nation-state. Trees became markers of progress for the nation while also idealized as keeping Japan rooted in its origins as a green archipelago in which trees represented the essence of Japanese character. Shintoism in particular upholds the idea of forests as sacred (Rots 2017) and for the Meiji state forests were a way to create an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) in

which Japan was a forest loving nation and forests a quintessential part of Japanese culture, character, and Shintoism. This later became of use for the colonization of Korea in which Japan expanded forestry outside of its borders.

In *Seeds of Control*, David Fedmen (2020) shows how Japanese forestry becomes a regime of dominance to assert power in the uplands of Japan for modernization, but also the justification for the expansion of Japan's empire into the Asia-Pacific region, namely Korea, through reforestation. Fedmen shows how Japan developed a particular nationalism connected to the ideology of "forest-love thought" (*airin shiso*) which gave legitimacy to the colonization of Korea through reforestation. During the Meiji Reconstruction period, Fedmen (2020: 31) argues that European forestry, especially Germanic, influenced Japanese forestry scientists in forming a "sylvan enlightenment" in which "forests were a visible metric of modernity, that the thickness of forest cover was an indication of national progress." Development of Japanese industries were often shaped by "practices of comparison" by seeking particular "European desires" which were associated with becoming modern (Swanson 2022: 65). Under the image of Japan as a forest loving nation and culture, the Meiji state employed a bureaucratic forestry regime of "expertise" to enter Korea and change the Korean landscape from "red pine" mountains, which the Japanese state viewed as "backwards", to "green" mountains which symbolized Japanese essence and modernity (Fedmen 2020). The Meiji state used forests as a resource to organize colonial power in both the nation-state and empire building, which was concealed under the ideological claims of Japan as a forest loving culture and nation.

The imperialization of forestry in the Meiji period organized colonial power through tree plantings for empire building enacted overseas under similar claims of progress and modernization seen in Japan's post-war era with the creation of monoculture forests. Scholars describe these exploitative logics and transformations enacted through plantations as the *Plantationocene* (Haraway 2015). The legacy of forest-making in the Meiji era preconfigured the role of trees for the state in post-war reconstruction in which reforestation was used to make ideological claims of high economic growth for all, while using the efforts of rural households to participate in drastic landscape transformation to recreate a green archipelago, but one that served as a monoculture regime for economic growth.

Forests in Post-war Japan: a monocultural regime for capitalist growth

"Hop in my truck, I will show you my *yama* [mountain]" said Jiro-san (72 years old). I got into his truck and he shifted the car into drive as we went up a narrow road that led up into the mountainside in the village of Nishiawakura. Jiro-san was born and raised in the village. We met through a local newcomer who had brought me to Jiro-san's home for dinner. During the dinner I had learned that Jiro-san owned a mountain in the village and had asked him to take me there one day. Jiro-san was eager to show me around his mountain. We sped down the narrow one lane road, making a series of turns ascending the mountain until the car came to an abrupt stop. "Get out, we need to go by foot from here" he said. I trailed behind him as he led me into his forest. Entering the forest felt similar to entering a dimly lit cave. The ground was covered with fallen thin branches and the occasionally green shrubs sprouting between the tall trees that lined his mountain. The trees stood straight and tall like Tokyo skyscrapers, equally spaced apart, and created a sense of uniformity in the forest. Some trees were skinny and others larger in their radius. These trees had a dominant presence, but also created a dark atmosphere in contrast to Jiro-san's energetic and upbeat personality as he continued to hike further up the mountain.

Figure 2. Jiro-san's monoculture forest planted during the postwar era

-"I haven't stepped foot back here in 50 years. I planted these trees when I was a young child with my family"

-“All of these trees? How did you get up there?”, I asked in shock as I saw the expansive territory the trees covered.
-“Yes, we would walk all the way up there, even to the top of the mountain,” he replied excitedly.
Jiro-san recalled that he was in 4th grade when his family asked him to participate in the tree planting, he stated:

> My great grandfather would take me to the mountain. He said, ‘Jiro let’s go!’ I started planting trees when I was in elementary school. In one day I would plant 20 trees. I was only in 4th grade so I could not plant more than 20 trees because you have to dig holes and then plant the trees. But the adults would plant about 200 to 250 trees a day. Some people even planted 300 trees in a day. But they usually planted on average 250 trees per day. My family would give me allowance money for planting the trees.

Jiro-san represents one of many rural households across Japan who participated in Japan’s post-war reconstruction through tree planting in which the state subsidized the planting of sugi and hinoki. The post-war period was marked by a number of reforestation policies and amendments. In 1956, the Forestry Agency of Japan established a finalized “expansive” reforestation policy called *Kakudai-zourin* to expand areas for new forests for reconstruction due to low timber stocks after the war (Kitabatake 1992). Under the policy, mountain owners in Japan received subsidies to plant sugi and hinoki tree species. In economic terms, sugi and hinoki were seen as economically productive tree species because of their lightweight, functional use for construction, and fast growth rate (Matsushita 2015). Japan implemented the reforestation policy to increase low timber stocks for post-war construction. However, under this reforestation policy it also called for the replacement of the existing *tennen-rin* (natural forest). As a result, broadleaf tree species were replaced with the more commercially valuable sugi and hinoki which benefited the corporate interests of the Japanese paper and pulp companies (Yoshimura 2003).

Elderly interlocutors shared with me that under the post-war planting policy, they recalled villagers cutting down *koyouju* (broadleaf trees) and replanting with sugi and hinoki. Many of these baby boomers I spoke with were children when they participated or observed their family members during the postwar tree planting boom. During a group interview, a local Kamikatsu woman who was 72 years old, shared “My father did work in *ringyo* [forestry]. I remember I used to help him. There was a period when they were saying ‘please plant sugi.’” She recalled that broadleaf tree species were cleared, and were replaced with coniferous (*shinyouju)* tree

species. Under the state-led planting project, sugi and hinoki were deemed of economic value while broadleaf trees became excluded from the vision of a prosperous future. This was especially evident in Jiro-san's forest in which there was no broadleaf tree in sight.

Residents referred to mountains planted with sugi and hinoki as *jinkorin* which means artificially planted forests by humans. The *kanji* (Sino-Japanese) character 人 (jin) means "human" and 工林 (korin) means "planted forest". Today in Nishiawakura 93 percent of the village's land area is forest with 84 percent of this forest area is *jinkorin* (Nishiawakura Village Office 2014). Knight (1997: 711) notes Japan's post-war reforestation symbolized an "expression of recovery" that was "hailed as a great national achievement, one which restored Japan as the 'green archipelago' (*midori no retto*)." For the state, timber was a valuable resource needed for post-war reconstruction, but at the same time reforestation became a symbol of national recovery. Knight (1997) argues that post-war reforestation was a way for the state to manage the legacy of deforestation due to over-felling during the war[1]. The national planting campaign under the reforestation policy pushed the slogan "making the mountains green" which recruited mountain villagers as vital members in post-war reconstruction by restoring Japan's green mountains (Knight 1997). Knight importantly notes that the national reforestation movement was tied with tree planting ceremonies called "*shokujusai*" performed by the Imperial Family.

The first *shokujusai* ceremony was established in 1950 (*Showa 25-nen*) where it was first held in Yamanashi Prefecture and the ceremony has continued into contemporary Japan as an annual event held each Spring in a different prefecture. The *shokujusai* event in Yamanashi was held under the slogan "Green clothes for the damaged landscape" (*areta kokudo ni midori no hare-gi o*) (MAFF 2013). According to Knight (1997) in the ceremony the emperor plants three young sugi trees in a triangle formation which represents the kanji character for forest (*mori*) 森. The kanji character isolated by itself 木 (*ki*) means tree. The empress then plants three young hinoki trees in the same 森 formation. Afterwards, forestry workers of the prefecture would then follow suit and begin the mass planting of trees. This ceremony is then later followed up by another royal planting ritual called *ikujusai* in which the Crown Prince returns to prune the sugi planted by the Emperor, his father. Knight (1997) argues that these two planting ceremonies led

[1] Extracting forest resources for warfare has been significant in East Asia; see Duan and Clements (2022) on timber resources for warfare, (Fedman 2018), and (McNeill 2004). In Japan, mobilization of forest resources was instrumental for the construction of warships, fighter planes (such as *kamikaze* suicide planes), and fuel during the war. This increased wood demand resulted in significant deforestation by the end of WWII (Iwai 2002).

by the Imperial Family create a symbolic tie between the Imperial Family and mountain families that “invokes the ideal of the Japanese forest-owning family, whereby a son faithfully continues the work started by his father, while its ceremonial silvicultural labor is symbolically directed at all the nation's forests" (Knight 1997: 715). Speeches were given during these royal planting ceremonies that evoked the image of forests as a “regenerative” resource for timber that would be cared for by one generation and passed to the next. Villagers became enlisted in a campaign in which they were planting to restore the nation’s national landscape of green mountains and usher in a new era of high economic growth.

Figure 3. Forest felling in Nishiawakura by villagers (photo received by resident)

Under the pretext of reviving Japan’s forests for post-war reconstruction, the state pushed reforestation and expansion of forest areas in which trees became part of the state’s logic for economic growth (*keizai seicho*). By offering subsidies to mountain owners to plant sugi and hinoki, forests were transformed into a monoculture regime for national postwar reconstruction that valued rapid economic growth under the emphasis of a forest depleted Japan. According to Nishiawakura’s village records, massive tree planting in the village began in 1949. An interlocutor working in forestry in the village heard from locals that publicly owned mountains under the village government were divided into small areas and distributed to villagers in an

initiative to generate wealth for private citizens. Village government records show that between 1967-1971 the village government accepted applications from villagers to purchase mountains.[2] My interlocutors used the term *yama* which translates to mountain and did not use the term for land when talking about ownership of forests. *Yama* can be defined as a sloped landscape occupied by trees and the term was used by interlocutors instead of land put in reference to forests. However, the term yama in relation to ownership of a mountain does not indicate that a person owns an entire mountain. Instead, the use of the term yama indicates that the person owns a portion of the mountain among several other private mountain owners.

During my interview with a village government employee who helped with the Nishiawakura 100 Year Forest initiative, she explained that there used to be a mix of broadleaf trees and pasture grasses on the mountains that were part of what would be described today as part of Japan's satoyama landscape. However, the state led reforestation created relations between trees and economic growth which drastically altered the mountains. She explained:

> After the Second world war ended, Japan had to revitalize and started planting many trees. They said 'let's grow the economy' [*keizai seicho o saseyo*] and told everyone 'to plant trees, plant trees'. Then people started planting trees and the mountains completely changed. It used to be a mountain for ox to eat grass. Everyone used to have an ox at their home back then for their rice fields. The *yama* [mountain] was a place for grass to grow, but then people started dividing ownership of the mountain and planting trees.

[2] Staff in the Nishiawakura government assisted me in this record archival, however, they noted that the start date of the distribution of mountains to villagers is unclear. These were the only records they could find and also the staff were unable to find a name for the mandate that resulted in the distribution of mountains to residents. Most villages do not know who owns mountains anymore, such erasure of tracking ownership of mountains seemed to be common.

Figure 4. Ox plowing the rice field in Nishiawakura in WWII (photo from resident)

In James C. Scott's (1991) analysis of the European state and Germanic forestry practices, he argues that "state tunnel vision" neglects the other uses for forests, such as pasturage, and instead forests are seen as commodities through "utilitarian simplification" (1991: 21). Japan's forests became contextualized from the viewpoint of the state, in which forests were "treated as a national (productive or environmental) resource" for economic revenue (Knight 1991: 713). Anna Tsing (2018) notes in the satoyama, the forest was a mix of sugi, hinoki, and broadleaf trees based on "biological" companionship. In contrast, the state-led reforestation project represents the deterritorialization of satoyama through the removal of "biological companion" tree species, which has created ecological alienation to achieve capitalist accumulation. Tsing (2018: 246) argues that "alienation" is "a mainstay of the commodification of plants and animals."

In a satoyama ecological system, relations of domestication are based on *multispecies mutuality:* the biodiverse satoyama was a source of food for the ox and the ox helped villagers care for the rice paddies that produced food for the village. Uniformity creates legibility for the state to transform forests into resources to exploit (Scott 1999). Uniformity was the overall character and shape of the forests I spent time in, such as Jiro-san's forest. Staying attuned to noticing the shapes of trees is important to understand the lifeworld of a forest (Matthews 2022). Jiro-san's dense forest of sugi and hinoki were uniform and straight, yet skinny and appeared unhealthy. He explained to me that ideally the trees should be the same in size and straight, this

was how to create value for the tree as a commodity resource to be transformed into timber. Domestication under the logics of a plantation are not based on mutuality and diversity, rather, it is based on "taming" and "discipline" to create uniform sugi and hinoki ready for timber (Tsing 2018). However, today forests in Japan are mostly in decay with trees growing thin as they have been abandoned by their owners.

From the mid 1950s to 1970s, Japan's economy experienced high speed economic growth also known as "the Japanese economic miracle." During this period the price of domestic timber skyrocketed due to the demand for construction and scarcity of wood at the time (MAFF 2013). My interlocutors emphasized that the price of trees in this period was extremely high, such as 40,000-50,000 yen ($400-500) for one large tree and 400,000 yen ($4,000) for a single hinoki tree at its highest value. Jiro-san recalled that he was scolded by his great grandfather when he tried to use wood to make a fire. He stated, "I used some leftover wood that he didn't use and used that as firewood. He got so angry because that was worth money!"

The temporal dream of high speed economic growth was projected onto the landscape through reforestation. However, it still takes 50-60 years for hinoki and sugi to mature into trees ready to be felled for use. Although these tree species are considered fast-growers the meaning of "fast" growth is different for the life of trees. During the 1960s timber-self sufficiency was at 86.7% (JATAN 2013), however, demands for wood chips increased and became a vital part of the state's economic development. As a result, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry encouraged Japanese paper and pulp corporations to import wood from foreign countries (Yoshimura 2003). With government incentives, Japanese pulp and paper corporations took their business outside of Japan's borders to Southeast Asia to extract cheap timber for wood chips. By 1999 timber-self sufficiency dropped to 19.2% (JATAN 2013). For villagers who had planted during the post-war period the dream of growing financial wealth over the next several decades quickly burst, but the trees continued to grow without care and management. As a result, village forests were largely abandoned by mountain owners and have become sites of capitalist ruins as an overseas woodchip market continues to supply the consumption demands for wood (Yoshimura 2003).

Jiro-san had not stepped in his forest for several decades. During our walk, we found a large sugi tree. He drew himself close to the sugi tree and expressed how the tree must be close to his age now. However, he expressed no real attachment to his mountain in terms of care.

Although he has inherited a mountain, it has not been part of his life since planting as a small child. He left the village as a young adult due to family conflict and later on as an adult he married and returned to the village when his only son was born. Jiro-san's wife has passed away and he lives with his son in a house in Nishiawakura. Although Jiro-san is retired during his spare time he receives work as a contract forestry worker under a large forestry company to help maintain mountain roads and cut trees in the prefecture, which provides him with extra income to spend. However, when it comes to his own mountain it has been abandoned.

From Promise to Burden

Families planted a staggering number of trees. My interlocutors reported that households planted as much as 300 trees in a day with the head of the households believing that there would be a high financial return which never came into fruition. Sugi and hinoki became entangled within the dynamics of capitalist accumulation in which trees were a "wealth for investment" (Tsing 2018: 246). Marianne Lien (2020) poignantly depicts this sentiment in her article *Dreams of Prosperity--Enactments of Growth.* Lien historically examines the state-led transformation of Arctic landscape into viable farmland to make a "resource frontier" for the Norwegian state as a project that ultimately failed. She observes how a tractor, now abandoned rubble, holds "...the hopes that were once nurtured about a more prosperous life on the northern coastline of Varanger, North Norway. The tractor is a memory of a future that never fully came to be" (Lien 2020:42). Similarly, decaying trees in Japan that have been left abandoned also hold the memories for a *yutaka* future that would create generational wealth, but never came to be.

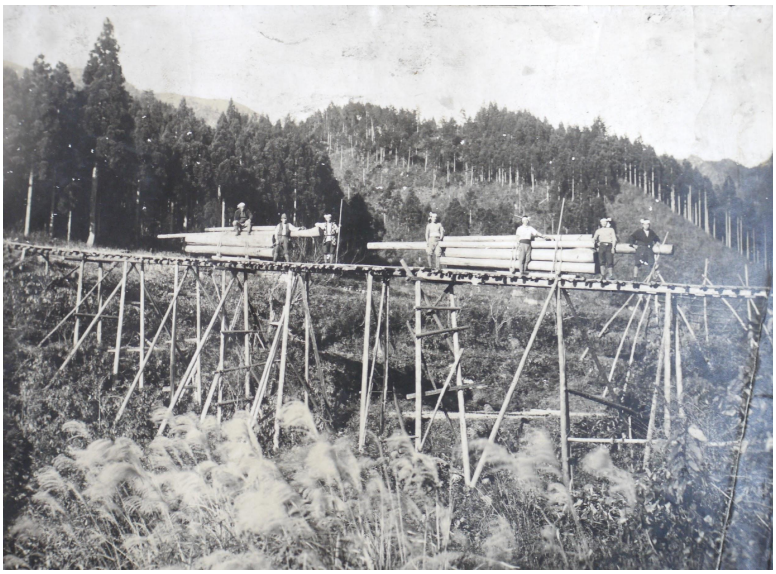

Figure 5. Forestry in Nishiawakura during the post-war period. One of the men pictured here is now 90 years old and still lives in the village today. (photo from resident)

I met elderly villagers who purchased mountains during the post-war period to have a stake in the forestry boom. However, there seemed to be various ways to own a mountain; for example, in Nishiawakura mountains became collateral between *izakaya* (bar shop) owners and villagers. *Izakaya* in the village were spaces for villagers to eat and drink, however, when they would overdrink to the extent they could not pay by cash, the shop owner would ask for their forest which was of value at the time and this also resulted in the further scattering of forest ownership.[3]

It was lucrative to own a mountain and work in forestry, and many of my interlocutors stated that families involved in forestry became well off financially. They often stated that families were even able to send their children to university from forestry work. For those growing up in rural Japan during the post-war period, the story of tree planting became one of securing economic prosperity that at one point seemed like a reality that would continue on. In terms of generational wealth, it was believed that planting trees would result in a financially prosperous (*yutaka*) future for their children and grandchildren. Kaze-san, a local resident in his late 60s, inherited a mountain from his father and does not know what to do with the mountain. His father had believed that the mountain would result in a financial inheritance in the future for his kids. Kaze-san stated,

> If you plant trees and they become big, then a *zaisan* [inheritance] would be left behind to their children. My father believed that and told me that we would make a lot of money and planted trees. At the time they planted so many trees earnestly thinking this is the path to provide a *yukata* [financially prosperous] life for their kids.

Jiro-san's son, Hino-san works as a forestry road planner in Nishiawakura. Jiro-san and Hino-san live under the same roof in a house in the village. Although Jiro-san showed me his unmanaged forests with great pride, his son Hino-san feels that inheriting the mountain is a burden due to the care needed to manage a healthy forest. Jiro-san also similarly noted that people thought that planting as many trees as possible would lead to a *yutaka* future in the terms

[3] Such transactions of forests between customers and izakaya owners is not documented in writing, this info was circulating orally in the village among elderly residents.

of financial prosperity which was equated to happiness. During a dinner conversation with his father and I, Hino-san stated with a mix of sympathy and frustration:

> They planted the trees for the children and they planted the trees with their kids. They wanted to make a *yutaka* [wealthy, affluent] generation and thought that would bring *shiawase* [happiness] for the future of their kids and grandkids. In the past the price was 10 times the amount it is now. So people could make a living. People thought that if things stayed like this, people would become *sugoi shiawase* [very happy] in the future. The grandpas planted many trees with that in mind. But when you open the lid to the situation it has become a mess.

From these accounts we see that there was no financial wealth passed down to future generations. Instead, for villagers like Kaze-san and Hino-san, they have inherited a burden.
By "mess" Hino-san is referring to the monoculture forest left behind that his generation has inherited. Hino-san described their family mountain as his great grandfather's "treasure mountain," but in which there was no treasure to be found. Trees became a form of speculation in which the risk did not lead to a future financial reward due to the drop in domestic wood prices when the Japanese government opened up the timber market to foreign imports. Markets are unstable, as exemplified by Japan's bubble economy which burst in 1991 (Allison 2012). However, the trees continued to grow despite the drastic decline of Japan's domestic timber market. The lives of trees follow a different temporality than of financial markets. Trees are stable and grow slowly, however, many post-war mountain owners projected a short-term growth outlook onto trees because financial prosperity became the guiding principle.

Shiga-san (86 years old), an elderly resident of the postwar generation reflects this theme of a treasure mountain that reaped no rewards. He lives in a somewhat dilapidated wooden house up in the mountainside in Kamikatsu with his wife, and his daughter has left the village. Skinny dogs were tied up to the property in the back. A metal round container was full of trash that he had tried to burn. His wife has dementia and he seemed unable to keep up with the maintenance of his home, however, he states that he still maintains his forests. He had told me he bought several mountains in Kamikatsu during the forestry boom thinking he would make millions in the future. He stated, "I bought the mountain for cheap and planted almost all *sugi* and only a few *hinoki* trees. During that time, I thought I would become a millionaire [*okumanchozai*] in the future. But the price of wood dropped." Shiga-san planted the majority of his mountain with sugi

in hopes of financial prosperity. It takes at least 50 years for a sugi tree, which is considered a fast grower, to be ready, but then the timber prices had dropped.

Some elderly men now in their 70s and 80s, such as Shiga-san, who had made a stake in forestry when it was a lucrative business at one point in time, still claim to manage their mountains although realistically they are not able to do so by themselves. I accompanied several elderly men to their forests, for who merely visiting their forest was their act of care. During my outings with them it was clear that managing the mountain alone was an impossible task with trees growing skinny and the dark atmosphere, which was a sign of a lack of forest thinning. They still hold onto the hope that the value of sugi and hinoki will possibly increase one day. Rural households cooperated in the state's reconstruction vision and planted a staggering amount of trees, but in the end villagers were left behind as the state sought out cheap resources by aligning with corporations to extract timber from Southeast Asia's forests. Peter Dauvergne (1997) coined the term "shadow ecology" to describe the destruction of rainforests in Southeast Asia created by Japan outside of its borders to pursue cheaply sourced timber resources. However, Heather Swanson's (2015) work on Japan's international salmon trade shows that resource exploitation abroad also has "shadows" within Japan's borders. In the context of rural Japan and forestry, the shadows are reflected in Japan's mountains which Hino-san describes as, "green, green, green," as well as and depopulation. Although economic growth slowed down and became stagnant domestically, which created a precarious labor market for Japan's citizens, economic growth has continued outside of its borders, as exemplified by the booming Japanese timber industry in Southeast Asia. In the end, the Japanese wealth project was pushed beyond its national boundaries and excluded certain people, in this case rural residents. I encountered many young residents who felt anger and frustration towards older generations, but often put all blame on elderly mountain owners for the decaying forests. However, what younger residents miss is that there are unseen and invisible forces linked to Japanese corporations that have deep alignment with the national government in a system that organizes power and economic unrest, yet excludes people like rural residents from the wealth project. It is not that the demand for timber declined, rather timber corporations turned to foreign timber imports, which they could extract as a resource of value yet at cheap costs, thus undercutting the state's promise of prosperity to individuals.

A Scene of Village Depopulation

Studies on depopulation in Japan show that the decline of forestry was a significant trigger for depopulation in mountain villages (Tsutsumi 2021). Residents discussed that with the decline of forestry, people left the countryside as it was no longer a place of opportunity, and were forced to go to cities to secure employment. An elderly resident who owns a mountain in Kamikatsu stated, "The biggest reason for *kaso* [depopulation] was that trees could not be sold anymore. Foreign timber came in and trees didn't sell anymore." Several elderly women in the villages stated that their husbands had planned to go into forestry, but then forestry declined and their husbands had to leave the villages to take on employment in cities doing other occupations. During a group interview in Kamikatsu, one woman in her late 70s stated, "If you have a mountain and were involved in forestry you were able to make a good living. But around my generation, the forestry started to decline and people like my husband became salarymen." A woman sitting beside her also in her 70s chimed in, "My grandfather was doing forestry and my husband was supposed to do forestry but then the population decreased here. You used to be able to make enough income from forestry to support your kids through college. Now people graduate college and work in the city -- that is the pattern."

Reminders of human depopulation were always present in rural Japan. During my visits to the Kamikatsu town hall, a daily electronic countdown of the total population loomed over the heads of office staff. The closure of schools due to depopulation is common in rural villages, which was the case in Nishiawakura. In Kamikatsu, classes had as few as two students per class. Vacant homes called *akiya* made the majority of the total housing stock in the villages. I especially felt the sense of human absence in Kamikatsu during my drives deeper in the village's mountains. Dark green weeds overtook abandoned buses and homes. Weeds and vines climbed through cracked windows and doors of vacant homes. Road paths carved out in the mountains by human usage were now overgrown with weeds. The image of a satoyama woodland which depends on human care had faded into the weeds, instead the mountain had the presence of a *"mori"*. Residents stated that *mori*, although it translates to forest in Japanese, is used when a forest has the presence of being dark, scary, and the absence of people.

Figure 6. Abandoned bus and cars overtaken by weeds

In Kamikatsu I visited an area that was especially depopulated and the presence of past residents was replaced by handmade scarecrow dolls called *kakashi*. One of the last resident's remaining in this *genkaishuraku* (terminal area of a depopulated village) in Kamikatsu was a 90 year old woman named Mina-san who lives alone in a large wooden home. She still tended to her vegetable garden and I was drawn to her presence because it seemed she was one of the only people left in her area and there was still a sense of care for her home and garden. Her house overlooked rice fields that were abandoned with weeds growing tall. Around her property I found large rusty metal containers hanging in different spots, which she hits with a stick to scare the monkeys away when they come down to her home. Her family's grave was perched on an inclined slope next to her vegetable garden. However, what was most striking were the *kakashi* dolls positioned in various places around her property.

Figure 7. *Kakashi* dolls outside Mina's residence

Mina-san is petite in size and always wears a large straw brim hat. I usually found her pulling weeds from her vegetable garden whenever I visited her home. When I first stumbled upon her home, Mina-san was sitting in her garden and she was startled to see another person. I told her I came from the U.S which startled her even more. "Why would you come all the way to this tiny village?" she asked. I explained my research on rural revitalization and asked if I could talk to her sometime about her life in the village. She replied it was too embarrassing and that she has nothing to share. I visited her home a number of times and brought her snacks. She eventually opened up and told me that the dolls were made by her daughter who had left the village and currently works in Tokushima City. Her daughter learned to make dolls from a woman in another part of Shikoku. Even in a neighboring village to Nishiawakura I found similar dolls in highly depopulated districts. Village residents in Kamikatsu told me that elderly residents felt lonely and sad, so Mina-san's daughter had made and put up dolls as a way to make them feel less lonely.

The life-sized dolls around Mina-san's property were often representations of family units. A baby stroller with baby dolls sitting inside was propped up against a metal tool shed. Next to the baby stroller was an older child doll sitting and leaning closely against his doll mother and father. The dolls were dressed in real clothes, hats, and shoes. Toys of what seemed

to be from past children or grandkids were laying around the doll children. Although I tried a number of times to inquire more about the dolls her daughter had made, Mina-san revealed very little. When I asked her how she feels to see no people in her area, she expressed that she felt *"sabishii"* (sadness), but she does not want to leave. She enjoys caring for her vegetable garden and living in the mountains. During my last visit to her home, I brought two young newcomers with me and we sat with Mina-san on her porch and shared tea and tangerines together. She laughed and smiled with us and seemed to enjoy our company. The presence of accelerated depopulation and the hollowing out of rural villages after the decline of the forestry industry in Kamikatsu was particularly felt and marked by *kakashi* dolls that stand in place for villagers and dreams of prosperity now long gone.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tracked the significance of forests in relation to Japan's political economy. I have shown how trees, in particular *sugi* and *hinoki*, became important resources for timber in post-war reconstruction, but deeply connected to Japan's colonial history in relation to nation-state and empire building, nationalism, and modernity. I traced the story of mass tree planting in relation to Japan's rapidly growing economy and then its decline into economic stagnation which defines post-growth Japan. State-led reforestation during the post-war period became a national movement that recruited mountain villagers into the governmental promise of a *yutaka* future of financial prosperity for rural families and the nation. I have shown that mountains shifted from promise to burden as individual financial prosperity was undercut by the state supporting timber corporations to extract wood resources outside of Japan's borders. The decline of the domestic forestry industry and drop in local timber prices was a significant trigger in depopulation as villagers left for cities. Today, mountains in post-growth Japan are in decay and trees are now capitalist ruins left behind by the state and their owners. However, urban migrants are migrating from cities to depopulated rural mountain villages. In the next chapter, I turn to the affective experience of living in urban Japan to understand reversal in the urban-rural migration as people leave cities and move into the countryside.

Chapter 3.

Seeking the "Good Life": a crisis of meaning in post-growth Japan

In the village of Nishiawakura, I noticed the phrase "*ikiru o tanoshimu*" (生きるを楽しむ) written on sign boards in front of the village government office and in government pamphlets. This village slogan translates into English as "to enjoy living"[4] and became a salient theme in relation to the aspirations of villagers during my time in rural Japan. In the Fall of 2021, I arrived in Nishiawakura during the rice harvest season. I had been invited to help with the rice harvest and joined villagers in *inekari* (rice cutting). There I met Shiori-san, an urban migrant (*iju-sha*) in her early 40s helping two elderly village men with the harvest. The term *iju* 移住 translates as "to migrate" or "to relocate" and the term *iju-sha* is used in in reference to a person who migrates to the countryside from a city. Shiori-san was originally from Tokyo, a city of over 37 million people and the world's largest metropolis, but now lives in Nishiawakura, a depopulated rural village of approximately 1,400 residents. She is petite in size, but strong and eagerly followed the instructions of the elderly on how to harvest rice. Together we cut the rice alongside the elderly brothers whom she seemed close with. "How is the indigo planting going?" one of them had asked her. "I'm just starting, we will see," she chuckled. Shiori-san had enrolled in the Regional Revitalization Cooperative Program (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*), a national government program that financially supports urban residents to relocate to the *inaka* (Japanese countryside) and pursue their own interests for up to 3 years, but due to Covid-19 offers support for up to 5 years. The project has funded her relocation to pursue her passion for indigo dyeing and weaving.

After the rice harvest I asked her if I could visit her home sometime, which she agreed and invited me for lunch later that week. She rented a small house from a elderly resident who lived across the street in the main home. Her house was small, but still larger in comparison to most tight Tokyo apartment rooms. Inside she had a small kitchen, dining area, and off to the side her wooden weaving equipment. She receives a monthly living stipend and also additional business material stipend to support her lifestyle through the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Program, which she says is enough for her to live comfortably. Her home

[4] The term *ikiru* 生きる *by itself means "to live".* However, ikiru in the context of *ikiru o tanoshimu* translates most accurately "to enjoy living" and to enjoy the process of life and living.

overlooked the rice paddies and she had a small vegetable garden in the front where she grew a small plot of organic vegetables for her own consumption and also indigo plants to produce dye that would be used for her hand woven crafts.

Shiori-san's migration was triggered by two large-scale crises–the March 11, 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster– but also her personal existential crisis of meaning. When she graduated university, Japan had a low employment rate, which resulted in her inability to secure a full time secure job. Instead, she was part of a growing and entrenched "precariat" class (Standing 2011) working for a number of years doing part-time jobs (*baito*) and as a contract worker (*haken-shain*) at the university from which she had graduated. Eventually at the age of 28 she secured a full time job at a fashion trading company and worked there until the age of 39. She described feelings of discomfort with mass production (*tairyo-seisan*) as she worked in the company. Feeling disillusioned with her work and life in Tokyo she left the city to carve out a different life path in rural Japan. Her move was part of a pursuit of a more meaningful way of living that centers around new ideas of self (*jibun*) and lifestyle (*kurashi*)[5]. We sat down at her small dining table and talked while eating lunch that she had cooked using organic vegetables she had grown herself. While eating lunch she shared:

> I really wanted to try living in the countryside [*inaka*]. The first reason was 3.11 [March 11, 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster]. I was living in Tokyo and I started thinking hard about myself *[jibun no koto sugoi kangai te]* especially in relation to food. Before the disaster, how to say it...I was 'unconscious'. Then I started thinking 'how do I want to live?' [*jibun do yatte ikitekitai*]. So I thought someday I would like to live in the countryside and do *monozukuri* [craft-making]. And I thought oh I'm getting in my 40s, so I quit my Tokyo job. I think being an employee is *raku* [easy], but I cannot be this *jiyu* [free]. I will just make today a rest day [she laughs] since the weather is nice. I will take a *yasumi* [rest] and maybe I will go somewhere. I feel very *jiyu* [free]. I am not thinking so much about my business in terms of wanting to make a lot of money. I just want to enjoy everyday living [*kurashi o tanoshimi-tai*].

Japanese capitalism and thus work-life are rooted in the concrete jungle of Tokyo, Japan's economic center. It is also the largest megalopolis in the world. Millions moved following World

[5] *Kurashi* is a term used when talking about everyday living and lifestyle, but is difficult to translate into a single word in English since it holds several meanings. It can also translate as livelihood, making a living, to live, and to spend time. My interlocutors use it mostly when talking about their lifestyle.

War II, abandoning villages for the cities. As a result rural villages were depopulated and abandoned. The last several decades of scholarship have focused on the demographics of depopulation and aging in rural Japan, specifically focused on how most of the residents of villages are elderly men and women over the age of 65 (Knight 1994; Knight 1995; Traphagan and Knight 2003; Tanaka and Iwasawa 2010; Thang et al. 2023). It is not just that elderly men and women live in the countryside. It has been an urgent concern as there are no children to populate the schools, no workers for local businesses, and no residents to sustain essential town services such as health services, postal service, firefighters, and police resulting in rural towns to turn their lights off completely or merge into larger municipalities. However, there has been a movement of urban migrants by which I mean people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s leaving Japan's cities, especially Tokyo, and migrating to the countryside previously abandoned in early generations. According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, in 2021 the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Program saw an increase by 455 from the previous year to 6,015 participants due to Covid-19.

Scholars note it was not until the 1990s following the bust of the economic bubble that there was a clear "lifestyle migrant" trend developing in Japan (Fujita and Leng 2022; Klein 2020; Nagatomo 2015). The tsunami and nuclear disaster of March 2011 was an especially important trigger in urban to rural migration. Covid-19 also seemed to have spurred another influx of urban migrants to rural Japan. There is a separate but related phenomenon of Japanese moving overseas as immigrants, such as to Southeast Asia (Ono 2009; Ono 2015). Susanne Klien (2020) who writes on urban migrants in rural Japan states that *iju* (rural relocation) in Japan can be seen as a "project of the self" (Klien 2020: xxi), but that is tied to precarity. She follows the lives of contemporary Japanese youth who have abandoned conventional Japanese work-life such as intense work schedules, tight apartment housing, and notions of success in relation to material wealth by "opting for cohousing and coworking spaces in remote villages" (Klien 2020: xxi). Klien's ethnography points to various reasons for relocating to the countryside including self-realization, self-fulfillment, better work-life balance, starting their own business, and more (Klien 2020: 8). Such reasons for migrating to the countryside all point to broader aspirations for a good life in post-growth Japan.

In this chapter, I focus on questions of meaning in the lives of urban migrants on their quest for "the good life" in rural Japan. There is an increasing trend of young and middle-aged

people seeking out the countryside, many disenchanted by capitalism's demand and intensity. I found that urban migrants faced a "crisis of meaning" in their lives in relation to the exhaustive lifestyles and environments in Japanese cities. Unlike previous generations, material and financial wealth are no longer the primary aspiration for a good life. Instead, my interlocutors in their 20s-40s felt *shihonshugi* (capitalism) had failed in creating meaningful ways of living. Jock Collins's (1984: 51) analysis of Marx's theory on labor states that for Marx the "floating" population were uprooted from the countryside and moved to cities, and thus "corresponded to those workers who were displaced or mobile between jobs from the 'centres of modern industry' because of technical change and the concentration and centralisation of capital." In what has become an inversion of the capitalist imperative, urban migrants can be seen as a new "floating" population, or people who have been dispelled by the workforce and floating around, now seeking refuge in the Japanese countryside (Allison 2012). What do their affective experiences tell us about living in contemporary Japanese cities? What questions of meaning are urban migrants raising in post-growth Japan?

Contemporary Japan's Rupture in Subjectivity

At the end of my fieldwork in Japan, I returned to Tokyo for family matters. Anyone who has been to Tokyo knows that riding the train during rush hour is an unpleasant affair. I found myself surrounded by *salariman* (salarymen) wearing the uniforms of work: business suits of the same dark navy color, women wearing high-heels and gray suits, and university students in black suits with hair arranged all the same for their *shushokukatsudo* (job hunting season). Similar to the monoculture regime of trees I observed in the mountains, Tokyo had its own regime of labor, uniformity, and density. It was not unusual for my train rides in Tokyo to suddenly come to a halt due to an emergency related to suicide. An announcement would follow by the Japan Railway staff stating that there had been an "accident" (*jiko*) involving "a person on the tracks". This was the signal that a person has jumped off the train platform to commit suicide by colliding into a moving train. What I have always found unsettling was how such suicide train announcements became background noise part of everyday living in the city. During such incidents, people continue to stare down at their smartphones, play video games, or express impatience over how long it is taking for the train to get moving so they can make it on time to their work meetings.

When the train resumes it is business as usual with workers shuffling and pushing past each other to hurry off to work.

Urban migrants that I met in the villages often recounted the relationless aspects of work and everyday living in Japan's cities. It was common for interlocutors to describe city life as lonely, unsafe, and scary. Many shared feeling socially disconnected and *sabishii* (lonely) in Japanese urban life. Rising suicide, *hikikomori* (severe social withdrawal), and *kodokushi* (lonely deaths) have become common news. Anthropologists have found that Japanese society is suffering from a "crisis of subjectivity" (Silva 2021) part of a "social precarity" felt across the nation (Allison 2012). Anne Allison (2012: 348-349) defines social precarity as "a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one's (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community." As a result, the term "relation-less society" (*muen-shakai*) has emerged in mainstream discourse to describe contemporary Japan. Allison (2012: 346) states that *muen-shakai* is "where the stitching of connectedness between people is fraying at the seams. Being alone--literally, psychically, socially- is the new human condition for Japan/ese in the 21st century."

Once the second largest economy in the world and now the third, following the rise of China, Japan has been a model of economic development for the rest of Asia if not the world (Johnson 1982). Yet, despite Japan reaching high economic wealth through the process of capital accumulation the nation has found itself with a population that is feeling precarious, unhappy, and lonely. I found that many urban migrants were afflicted with a *crisis of meaning* in their lives. By *crisis of meaning* I am referring to the existential and subjective state of absence of meaningful purpose, self-worth, and value. I contextualize this crisis of meaning by drawing on comparative lived experiences of urban migrants to understand particular affective experiences that triggered their urban to rural migration. A crisis of meaning among urban migrants signaled a large scale social rupture in subjectivity in contemporary Japan. A rupture is a break, disruption, or discontinuity, but as scholars note it can result in "reconstitution" in which "value emerges through a break" (Holbraad et al 2019: 1). For urban migrants, their move to the countryside was a way to reconstitute their relationship with the self (*jibun*) and non-material values to find purposeful meaning.

Similarly, anthropologist Chikako Ozawa-de Silva's (2021) study on Japan as a "lonely society" shows that loneliness centers around a lack of meaning in people's lives. Loneliness, she

argues, has become an "epidemic" in economically advanced countries such as Japan, the United States, and the UK. In *The Anatomy of Loneliness,* Chikako Ozawa-de Silva (2021), examines loneliness in Japan by studying Japanese youth organizing group suicides through online suicide webpage forums. She tracks suicide rates in Japan across time starting from the Meiji era, however, she notes that it was not until 1998 that suicide rates hit an alarming high that carried on for the next several decades. Experts have attributed this enduring and alarming trend in suicides with economic stagnation and unemployment following the bust of the bubble economy (Silva 2021: 4). She reveals how during the 1990s, neoliberal economic policies taken by the government to deal with economic stagnation led to the dissolution of the "family-corporate system" (Silva 2021: 54). During the post-war period, Japanese companies took on the role as an extension of the family system. The social contract was that workers dedicate their lives to the company, but the sacrifice would be returned with the reward of economic security through lifelong stable employment and social welfare support. However, in 1998 the state introduced neoliberal policies that allowed companies to lay off long time employees who became replaced with "temporary workers" who "lacked the pay, job security, and benefits of a full-time position (Silva 2021: 55), a new labor regime emerged: contract workers (*haken-shain*) and part-time (*baito*) like Shiori-san. However, she argues that economics alone does not tell the entire story for the increase in suicides because suicides occurred across all age cohorts, not only working Japanese adults, but also adolescents. She states that these structural shifts in Japanese society created a system in which people did not feel an intrinsic worth and purpose across all age cohorts and gender groups. Silva (2021: 192) argues:

> The role of the economy is therefore important, but not because a reestablishment of economic growth would restore optimism and end the emptiness that leads to loneliness and suicide. Rather, Japan's economic stagnation has revealed the emptiness of the promise its political economy was built on, the promise that justified sacrifice. The emptiness left behind is now being seen by young Japanese, who are provided with few societal resources to make meaning and find a place of belonging. Within such a context of failed promise, the demand for sacrifice turns sour, unpalatable.

Her focus on the affective realities of suicides in Japan reveal loneliness as an issue of late-capitalist socities. Irene Sabate's (2016) work on mortgage debtors in Spain echoes a similar sacrifice as her interlocutors' worked strenuous overtime hours to meet mortgage repayments which became justified because homeownership was promised to be the entry into financial

stability and a “better life” (Sabate 2016: 111). However, she shows that the Spanish mortgage crisis disrupted the “linear” life trajectories that owning a home was based on (Sabate 2016). Mortgage debtors regressed in their life plans, such as moving back home with their parents (Sabate 2016: 117). She states mortgage debtors felt isolated and suicides entered news headlines. Crisis causes ruptures in “the temporality of life trajectories” (Sabate 2016: 108) and unclear futures in which capitalist promises lose meaning. This is exemplified by Japanese urban migrants deviating from the linear life paths in which moving to a city, such as Tokyo, had been normalized as a crucial step in upward mobility towards a good life in Japanese society.

Ikiru “To live”

Subjective states of emptiness and loneliness centered around a lack of meaning in life have often been themes captured in Japanese cinema. The 1952 film *Ikiru* by Akira Kurosawa, one of Japan’s most renowned film directors, addresses the crisis of meaning in the theme *ikiru*, which means “to live.” Although the film was made at the beginning phase of Japan’s growth period during post-war reconstruction, Kurosawa had predicted and already captured alienation caused by capitalist urbanization. Today, *Ikiru* remains regarded as a classic in Japanese cinema and it resonates with issues regarding the alienation of the human spirit in contemporary Japan as many urbanites feel they have hit their limit in utility.

The film tells the story of a Tokyo bureaucrat, Watanabe-san, who has worked 30 years in Tokyo City Hall’s public works department as section chief (*kacho*), but has never truly lived. The opening scene shows him stamping citizen complaint cases and forwarding responsibility to other departments in a meaningless system. The narration starts, “Here is our protagonist. But what a bore it would be to describe his life now. Why? Because he is only killing time. He has never actually lived.” However, he takes a day off to get a nagging pain looked at. The x-ray shows that he has stomach cancer and has less than a year to live. Although he wants to end his life he cannot because he feels he has never lived life in the first place. Feeling empty and lonely he reflects on his life as a waste of time. He becomes a madman in the search for meaning in his life to feel alive. Watanabe-san doesn't know how to spend his money nor use his time in meaningful ways. He tries gambling, clubs, parties, and buys a new hat, yet still feels empty. It was not until he received a suggestion “to make” something that he found a purpose. He decides to work on a previously ignored citizen case to make a swamp-like culvert area into a

neighborhood playground. For the first time he feels motivated and we see a glimpse of him feeling alive. When the park is completed, he dies. At his funeral, other city hall bureaucrats gather around his photo and are resistant to give credit to Watanabe-san for the park construction and completion. However, in the end after realizing the difficulty of what he did in a system of red tape they recognized he accomplished a great feat. They expressed that the city hall is a place where people are "supposed to not do anything. Seal after seal...we steal people's time". They want to follow in Watanabe's footsteps to create meaning, however, in the end they go back to business as usual stamping and shuffling papers, but never doing anything meaningful in their lives.

The film's theme *ikiru* proposes the question: what does it mean to live? This theme and question resonates with many of the experiences of urban migrants who have worked in cities. Hitomi-san, a local U-tuner in Kamikatsu in her early 30s, raised the question of meaning during our discussion when I asked her why she thought young people were leaving cities for the countryside. After graduating university, she returned to Kamikatsu because she had a clear purpose relating to family, to continue her mother's vision for a zero-waste village, and support her depopulating hometown. She states, "I think then people in their 30s, 40s, and young people feel like there is no meaning to live in a city or think about what is the purpose of that life? To do something that has meaning and contribution to something or the community I think that is getting stronger."

A Crisis of Meaning in Urban Japan

My interlocutors often drew comparisons between urban life in Japan which shaped particular affective experiences. Feelings of alienation, loneliness, fast-paced living, and an overall sense of burn-out (*tsukare)* were common when my interlocutors discussed their lives in Japanese cities. Many urban migrants felt they had lived lives that were absent in meaning.

Kasumi-san, now in her early 40s, made an I-turn to Kamikatsu after living in Tokyo and working as a document translator for a major architecture firm. She now works as an organic farmer in the village. Her personality is upbeat and quirky making it difficult for me to imagine her sitting behind a desk at a corporate office. Her reasons for leaving Tokyo were related to her work-life in Tokyo and the 3.11 disaster. After intense workdays at her Tokyo company she went to the market to purchase vegetables because they were cheap in price and made her feel "genki"

(restored in spirit). With high rent and living costs in Tokyo she was unable to spend much, thus she found small joy in eating delicious vegetables. After working on a series of large projects she lost motivation to continue working at the company because she did not feel valued by the company. She describes working alongside colleagues who had graduated from the top universities and had received the highest certificates in architecture, but due to the vertical hierarchical system in Japanese companies even qualified colleagues, especially women, were stuck in assistant positions. During her lunch with me she shared:

> We would have a daily meeting in the morning going over documents. I hated it. We were working hard and two times a week a consultant would come in and check our work. He would come in once and get like 15-16 *man yen* [$1,100-$1200] in one day for not doing much. While all of us below him were working so hard. When we finished the project, the *kacho* (section chief) name was there and our work was not recognized. Just put our name in there too somewhere. That's how Japanese companies are and I was living in this system. I thought, 'What's the point of working at a place like this?' There was no reason to work there. Consultants just come to talk and make so much money. I started to feel my work was meaningless. I lost motivation.

Her unhappiness with living in Tokyo hit a breaking point after the 3.11 disaster. Kasumi-san expressed frustration with the Japanese government's lack of information about the nuclear disaster. "The government did not release any information when the Fukushima nuclear explosion occurred. I had my laundry and everything hanging outside. I did not know there was a radiation leak. I thought, 'there is nothing good that will come from living in Tokyo.'" Lack of transparency and information by the government following the 3.11 disaster, resulted in further tensions under an already broken social contract between the Japanese state and citizens. The handling of the nuclear disaster by the state, resulting in mistrust among Japanese citizens following the aftermath of 3.11 is especially noted in the literature on food safety in Japan (Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015; Reiher 2017). The nuclear disaster was at a level 7 scale, the same as Chernobyl, and nuclear pollutants were detected across Japan (Samuels 2013; Sternsdorff-Cisterna 2015).

Kasumi-san's feeling of meaningless living, discontent, and inability to trust the state culminated in her final decision to leave Tokyo a place where she felt she could no longer belong. The only joy she found in her life was through the small-scale happiness of eating

vegetables after work. Kasumi-san's experience is similar to Shiori-san's story at the opening of this chapter. Both women had a crisis of meaning in relation to work, the urban environment, and safety. Under the broken social contract, urbanites feel emptiness in terms of meaning and belonging, especially in urban centers. For both women they aspired to live self-sufficient lifestyles especially when it comes to growing their own food associated with a fear of nuclear contamination. For them the countryside became a place of refuge for the mind and body to pursue a meaningful life, even though they had lower paying jobs.

It seemed that urban life in Japan for many of my interlocutors was experienced as an unsustainable way to live that became a meaningless sacrifice. So far I have described woman who have migrated to rural Japan. This is not completely unrelated to Japan's gender inequality in the labor market (Yamaguchi 2019), as seen in the case of Kasumi-san in which her female coworkers were stuck in certain level positions and unable to rise up the corporate ladder. Men migrate to the countryside as well. Taka-san, an urban migrant in his early 30s made a U-turn back to his village after working in the city of Nagoya as an engineer. Although he returned for family reasons, he reflects back on his time in the city as a life of exhaustion, stress, and pressure both work and the urban environment. When I asked him if he would want to return to the city he stated, "No I would not. You get money, but I feel like I am putting my life on the line in exchange for money". In the city, Taka-san described working until late due to regular overtime. Crowded train commutes from home to work also added to his exhaustion. Even when he was at home in his apartment complex he could not relax due to outside noise, but also the uneasiness (*iwakan*) and fear (*kowai*) of not knowing neighbors despite proximity. For him he described life as fast paced (*hayai*) attributed to the inability to relax. Both work and the actual urban environment created a high stress life. However, Taka-san escaped the fate of Kurosawa's bureaucrat who traded his life for work. Today, he works in the village splitting his time with a full time job at a local start-up company and part-time farming. He enjoys road biking, creating DJ music tracks, repairing broken objects in the zero waste center, and his slower pace of living.

Daniel M. Knight (2021) talks about the dizzying, disorienting, and anxious effects of what he calls "The Time of Crisis". His study on the economic crisis in Greece examines the ways in which "crisis is indexed by alienation from Self and Society", in which an existential "vertigo" results from enduring temporality of precarity (Knight 2021:32). Precarity is not only economic, but also existential, social, and material (Allison 2012; Knight 2021; Silva 2021).

Knight also observed an increasing urban to rural migration trend in Greece. Greeks moved into abandoned villages, which he calls a "coping mechanism" as many became alienated with themselves and society, resulting in similar deviations in life trajectories to urban migrants in Japan. He argues that following abrupt crises, such as Greece's financial crisis, is an enduring existential crisis in which Greeks reported feeling meaningless in their lives. He calls this a "vertigo of existential and material emptiness" from the "slow motion violence erosion of everyday life" (Knight 2021: 78). He states that for Greeks moving to abandoned mountain villages was a celebration of "rebuilding of Self...out of rubble" (pg.88). Similarly, urban migrants were triggered to rural depopulated villages as a way to follow different lifeways to rebuild meaning in their lives.

Generation-Z in the *Inaka*

Meeting interns and fresh university graduates was quite common in the villages. Most were in the middle of their university studies, taking a gap year, or in their first career job seeking to gain an "experience" (*taiken*), "learn" (*manabu*), and "study" (*beinkyo*) in the countryside. Urban migrants in their early 20s choosing the countryside for their first job after graduating college signals a shift in how rurality is perceived by younger generations. Interlocutors shared with me that it used to be looked down upon to return to the countryside, as it was a sign of failure to succeed in the city. This was referred to by the term "*miyako-ochii*". The *kanji* characters of the term *miyako-ochi* 都落ちinclude *miyako* 都 which refers to capital, metropolis, or city and *ochi* 落ち which means to fall, drop, come down. Miyako-ochi refers to a person who has failed to succeed in the city, especially Tokyo, and returns to their hometown. However, there is a clear shift in the perception of rurality among younger generations who are even graduating from university and starting their careers in rural Japan ,which would not have been the case ten years ago.

I noticed many urban migrants in their 20s had recently relocated to the countryside during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rural Japan has become a place of refuge for those in their 20s who were in liminal life stages of transition further disrupted by Covid-19. Fresh university graduates expanded their job searches beyond major cities such as Tokyo and Osaka to depopulated rural villages, often citing their disillusionment with city life as well as not standing out in the job market in a city such as Tokyo, which is oversaturated with qualified workers.

Haruna, a fresh graduate in her early 20s was unable to find a job in Tokyo, but had included the countryside during job hunting season after completing her studies in Tokyo.

She found Tokyo to be overwhelming and stated, "There was too much stuff like buildings, people, and things. It was just too much for me. I felt tired [*tsukare*] and I thought I don't like this. I started to think I would like to go to the *inaka* [countryside] someday. I didn't have a bad image of the *inaka*, if I compare it to Tokyo. Here in the village I know everyone, but in Tokyo I don't even know the person living next to me in the apartment complex and that is scary [*kowai*]."

Today, she lives in Kamikatsu working at the local village hot spring as a Rural Revitalization Cooperation Program participant. Unlike a cramped Tokyo apartment, in the village she lives in a spacious apartment, owned by the village government, with her boyfriend, a U-turner whom she met in the village. One of the benefits for couples and families is that local governments offer them priority for public housing that is often newly renovated and has low rent fees. She is engaged in community-building activities such as a recent photo-exhibition that featured the lives of elderly in the village. Unlike a city like Tokyo, her skills in social media are especially valued in a depopulated village with few young people or workers. Media attention, such as the national television network NHK, and local newspapers interviewing young urban migrants is not uncommon as their presence in the villages stood out, thus creating opportunities to showcase their projects and lives in rural Japan.

However, urban migrants such as Haruna and others of her age who are working their first jobs in the villages still felt drawn to return to Tokyo, despite their feeling of belonging in the village. During my dinner conversation with Haruna and another I-turner named Tomoko, they expressed their fears of missing out on the rules and formalities of Japanese work culture since starting their careers in the countryside. Tomoko, who is in her early 20s, moved to the village during the pandemic after graduating university and works at the zero-waste hotel and center. I worked alongside her and two other urban migrants in their 20s and 30s. However, most of the days we worked there was no boss to report to and Tomoko, the youngest, took on the role of the leader despite her lack of experience as a new graduate. Tomoko shared:

> Normally, newly graduates enter a company and they will have a boss and *senpai* [higher ranked senior colleagues]. There is this structure and there is a baseline that you are taught and you follow. But for us we didn't have that at all...maybe this is dangerous! I

> want to know the baseline, like how everyone is working. That type of experience, I don't have it. I am just doing what I want and I feel I am not integrating into the norms of society.

Haruna nodded in agreement with Tomoko because she also felt the same way. For example, they both believed they lacked the knowledge of how to make and exchange *meishi* (business cards), which is part of the social expectations of Japanese work culture. They used Youtube and internet searches to figure out the formalities of exchanging business cards for work.

Japan has often been described as a vertical-society (*take-shakai*) based on a rigid corporate hierarchical system (Kelly 1991; Nakane 1970; Mouer and Sugimoto 2004). Vertical relations of authority are largely associated with Japanese corporate structure, which is oriented around a hierarchical system based on age, gender, and the number of years working at a company. However, it was such communication and relations of working in Japanese work culture based on seniority and hierarchy that Tomoko and Haruna felt they were missing. Older urban migrants, such as Taka-san and Kasumi-san who had extensive experience working in large companies in the city, were satisfied with removing themselves from such a system. However, urban migrants in their early 20s, such as Haruna and Tomoko, whose first jobs were in the countryside, felt they were missing out on learning accepted social expectations and ways of communicating which would be taught when working at a large company in the city. It is such factors and fears of missing out on the structured ways of working that pressured urban migrants in their 20s to return to the city to gain the experiences of corporate Japanese work structure.

Conclusion:

Not only have the Japanese experienced economic precarity, but also precarity related to environmental disaster by earthquakes, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe. Anne Allison (2013) has powerfully framed this current state as "precarious Japan" to capture the social climate and mood in Japan. For urban migrants, living in a precarious Japan has resulted in a lack of meaning and belonging in cities. Living and working in a city, such as Tokyo, used to be part of the trajectory for a good life in Japanese society, however, many urban migrants felt alienated from themselves and society. For them city living became meaningless as the sacrifice was no longer justified. Instead, many lacked a sense of purpose and belonging in the city. People who are choosing to quit their jobs in cities are often taking jobs that are unrelated to their previous

careers and lower in pay. They are reassessing their values and priorities on what it means to live after becoming alienated in city life. For those in their 20s, they are able to receive attention because they are young and coming in with skills into a depopulated village, unlike an overcrowded city such as Tokyo in which they would become unnoticed among other qualified candidates. However, young migrants still felt pressure to return to Tokyo because of their fear of missing out. Many urban migrants I met did not seek an idyllic countryside life, instead, they wanted to reclaim agency over a fragmented sense of *jibun* (self) that was absent of meaning. Moving to the countryside was a way for urban migrants to seek a place of refuge to create meaning in their lives. In the next chapter, I examine the ways urban migrants are creating meaning in their lives by turning my attention to *kurashi*, happiness, and degrowth.

Chapter 4.
Finding Joy in Degrowth

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

-Henry David Thoreau (1854)
Walden; or Life in the Woods

During my time in rural Japan, I shared a house with a young urban migrant. On her bookshelf was a book called *The Abundance of Less* and featured Murakami-san, one of the first generation of urban migrants in the village of Kamikatsu. Later during my fieldwork, I made a number of visits to Murakami-san's home with other young urban migrants. Murakami-san is an elderly urban migrant who made an I-turn to the village in 1989 at the age of 43. Now in his mid 70s, he was often referred to as the "*sen-nin*" by village residents because of his wisdom on living simply, sustainably, and consciously. The most common English translation of sen-nin is "hermit", but he does not fit the image of one.

In reality, young urban migrants often make visits to Murakami-san's home, once an *akiya* (vacant home) that is nestled up in the mountains. In the 1990s, Murakami-san would have been considered an odd (*kawateru*) figure, however, today he has become a quasi statesman in *kurashi* as he advises urban migrants on ways to craft a meaningful life. Kurashi refers to lifestyle, but more broadly indicates a person's way of living. The kanji character 暮 in the word kurashi 暮らし holds multiple meanings in reference to everyday living such as livelihood and a way of spending time. *Crafting kurashi* is significant because it is both a skill and an art form that takes time and effort. Visiting Murakami-san is an all-day affair as visitors must intentionally slow down to fully take in the experience of his mindfully crafted *kurashi.*

Murakami-san always greets his guests with a large smile, and on this day, he welcomed me and other visitors into his home. His head is always shaven clean and his life revolves around the art of living simply. He is passionate about talking about his kurashi and sharing it with others. He is consciously aware of what he needs for his way of living and everything seems to serve a purpose in his lifestyle. He emphasizes the importance of "brushing up *kansei*" which he defines as a "sensitivity" in developing conscious awareness. During my visit to his home at the

peak of cherry blossom season another urban migrant asked, “How do you brush up kansei?” Murakami-san pointed to a nearby tree and replied, “This tree here has small buds, gradually they become larger in size and change in color. The entire mountain as well changes. Nature [*shizen*] changes slowly. Japan has many seasons. To hold attention to these changes, observe, and then enter nature...this is one way to develop your *kansei*.” This idea of conscious awareness is reflected in his kurashi as he has crafted his ideal way of living that is self-sufficient and sustainable.

Figure 8. Murakami-san talking about the importance of noticing the changing mountain scenery, which he views as part of *kansei*.

A typical routine during a visit includes a walk into his vegetable garden to observe what is currently growing in season, then preparing the woodfire to cook lunch, enjoying lunch outside, a tea break, and then making art on the second floor of his home. Every object from cups to handwoven baskets in his home are meticulously aligned, yet do not detract from the home’s homy and loose atmosphere. The furniture is all wood, which he has made himself. The living room was once the place where an ox used to reside in early generations when ox were important animals for tilling farmland. In the kitchen is a clay woodfire stove he built himself. A beautiful wooden spice rack he made covered one wall with glass jars filled with spices and dry beans. Along the side of his home is a small faucet connected to pipes that bring in mountain water. His toilet is a compost toilet and bath heated by firewood. In the back of the house, he has a small

station for garbage, but there is hardly any waste produced from his self-sufficient lifestyle. Upstairs is his bedroom, but during the daytime becomes his art studio. Sheets of cream colored *washi* paper are neatly aligned and clipped on a wire hanging near an open window that faces the mountain. We always end the day with creating a small piece of artwork and afterward we hold a mini exhibition in which he puts our art into empty CD cases and then lines them up against his wall. He points his one lightbulb in his room at the art ending our time together with a sense of joy.

In this chapter, I continue my interest in the meaning of *the good life* for urban migrants in post-growth Japan. As I have previously shown, a sense of meaningless and relation-less existence for urban migrants generated a crisis of meaning in their urban lives[6]. However, I now shift my attention to their everyday lives in rural Japan. I focus this chapter on the ways urban migrants attempt to cultivate meaning in their lives by focusing on the concept of *kurashi*. When I asked urban migrants what type of life they wanted to live, the response was often "to live simply." For many urban migrants, their aspirations in crafting a good life revolved around simple pleasures and joys in everyday living. Economic growth, material wealth, and high-consumption have become the normative guiding principles in contemporary Japan. However, the lives of urban migrants point to a "quiet revolution" (Alexander 2011) in which they enact degrowth on the ground through crafting lives that embrace the art of living simply.

I do not approach the good life as a final end destination, rather, I examine the good life in terms of meaning-making practices centered around the idea of kurashi and its organization of lives that provide a sense of fulfillment, joy, and happiness. My interlocutors used a wide range of terms such as: *shiawase* (happiness), *tanoshi* (joy), *omoshiroi* (interesting), and *manzoku* (feeling satisfied) to describe new kurashi, which I identify as pointing to the larger question of happiness.

An increasing number of studies in economics and psychology have shown that the correlations between increased income, consumption, and happiness are weak (Akin et al. 2009; Easterlin 2004; Kahneman et al. 2006). Anthropologist Thomas Eriksen (2015: 254) notes that if it is true that happiness is not correlated with economic growth, then we must shift towards "a new language, new models for thought and a new epistemology are needed in order to talk about

[6] The sense of meaninglessness is central to writings on urban modernity; see Georg Simmel's 1903 essay *The Metropolis and the Mental Life* who describes this as *blase.*

development and progress, where ecological footprints and life quality, not economic growth and increased production, form the baseline." Following this lead, I explore how urban migrants craft new forms of *kurashi* that bring joy into their lives, but also in doing so I pay attention to negotiations and challenges they face as they create new ways of being. As they reorganize their lives, I ask, how are urban migrants being in relationship with the economy, nature, themselves, and others in new ways?

I view the good life as a form of utopian thought in which urban migrants become what David Harvey (2000: 200) calls *crafty architects*, or "a metaphor for our own agency as we go about our daily practices and through them effectively preserve, construct, and re-construct our life-world." While Harvey insists that this cultivation takes place in the city, I follow the lifeways of my interlocutors who insist that it is only in the countryside that *kurashi,* and by extension, happiness, belonging, and community are possible. By focusing on urban migrants crafting their ideal *kurashi*, I examine how a new set of values aligned to degrowth rather than growth-oriented ideology has emerged in post-growth Japan. Degrowth entails *downscaling* but also the "reshuffling the importance of economic components of life towards the ones based on human relations, social connectedness and conviviality" (D'Alisa et al. 2015:113). Degrowth also calls for self-limits to modes of capitalist production and consumption to shift towards what Serge Latouche (2014) calls "a society of frugal abundance". As such, I investigate degrowth as a lived experience instead of merely an abstract concept.

Downscaling To Enough

During one of my visits, Murakami-san explained he grew up in a city during a period of incredible post-war economic growth. In middle school his family bought a television set for the first time, but he had no interest in watching any shows. However, during the 1960s when he was a teenager, a show called *Paironso* that focused on the economy caught his attention. In the show, the economy was shown as a pie chart in which a panel of two scientists debated about economic growth and happiness. He recalled the GDP (growth domestic product) was still a small proportion of the pie because the economy was just taking off. As Japanese incomes increased the GDP slice increased in the pie chart, however, the piece that people took out of the pie was also displayed as larger. This relationship was equated to happiness at the time, he stated:

> Maybe you have lots of money so you are able to buy more things. One of the scientists said if you have more of the pie and more money that will lead to people's happiness [*shiawase*]. But the other scientist said just because you have more and more money that is not correlated to happiness. The economy was taking off and growing rapidly in Japan and most people agreed with the opinion that the more money you had that was good. Even I had thought 'the bigger the pie, the more money, the more I buy, the more things... that is what I need!'

Ever since high school he had believed that making money would allow him to live a life with more "freedom" (*jiyu*). Now reflecting back he is surprised how much he had believed in this linear way of thinking about growth and happiness, because he has found happiness in downscaling. In fact at the age of 27, during the height of Japan's economic prowess, he quit his salaryman job – which meant that he worked for a large corporation with benefits such as the financial stability of a salary with regular bonuses and possible lifelong employment – in order to pursue his desire to travel the world. Prior to that he had developed a high consumption lifestyle in which he would "buy and pay later" resulting in debt. When he made the decision to pursue traveling, he continued his salaryman job to save and pay off his debt that he had accumulated from the growth-oriented lifestyle he had led up to that point. Then he worked an additional year to save up for travel. He spent one year thinking about whether he should quit or not. He shared with me during a lunch:

> When I made the decision, I thought if I quit being a salaryman it could be a difficult life and I would have no money or a low salary. So I might have a regret, but if I had continued as a salaryman until I was in my 60s and then looked back.. I would think 'Oh I wish I had gone traveling'. Whichever path you take you might have regret, but I asked myself...which regret is easier to live with? The regret of having done something or the regret of not having done something? Even if I had regretted the decision to travel and my life had become difficult I would be okay with it. That's when I thought...okay, I'm going to quit.

For the next 15 years Murakami-san traveled the world, but often with little money. He felt at times pain in his stomach from his worries over how to survive without enough money. Eventually he went to Nepal where he fell in love with wood block art and stayed for several years to study the craft. From his travels he discovered that there were many ways of living. When Murakami-san returned to Japan, he realized that he wanted to live a self-sufficient

kurashi to gain control over his use of time instead of spending his time working to make money. For him migrating to Kamikatsu, a rural depopulated village of vacant homes, was an low-cost opportunity for him to craft the life he aspired for, which valued degrowth rather than growth. He stated, "I came here trying to aim for this type of lifestyle. I took the opposite choice and path to most. Everyone around me, especially during the bubble period, had a life in which people wanted to consume more and make more and more money. But I was doing the opposite. I was downsizing more and more".

Murakami-san decided he wanted to live a life in which his time did not revolve around making money. To return to the analogy of the pie, he ended up taking up a smaller slice. To do so, he asked himself the following questions: How much of my life could I support without relying on money? How much would I need in a year? What are the things that I really need to buy using money within my lifestyle? To live the lifestyle he wanted he calculated he needed an astonishingly low amount of 400,000 yen ($3,000) a year to cover rent, food, and medical expenses. This was the minimum basic income to support his kurashi. He worked seasonally for a month and a half each year, but during the rest of the year he used his time in other ways centered on crafting his self-sufficient lifestyle and making block print art. I told him that most of us calculate how much money we earn not in a year, but in a single month to which he replied, "But that is because you receive money each month...month by month. But if you receive money only once a year then you would think in terms of years." In other words, Murakami-san is radically oriented towards work, money, and time in ways that are highly unorthodox, even among incoming migrants for whom these ways have had great appeal. He figured a clear cap on the amount of money he needed and in doing so he recognized what was *enough*, unlike most colleagues of his generation who he says were swept away with the euphoria of capitalist consumption.

In ways resonant with Murakami-san's journey, today, many urban migrants are in the midst of negotiating new relationships to money and time. Many young urban migrants have chosen to quit higher paying jobs in exchange for work that gives them much less money in the countryside. Urban migrants experimented with different ways of getting income by combining part-time jobs, seasonal farm work, and income from their own projects. Others received a basic

income through the state-led Rural Revitalization Cooperation Program,[7] with the only condition being that a person must have previously resided in a city to apply. This is also supplemented by additional income through the profits earned from their small businesses. Interlocutors enrolled in the program I met stated that the salary was enough for them to live comfortably. Shiori-san, an I-turner in Nishiawakura whom I have mentioned in the previous chapter, emphasized her value in feeling "freedom" (*jiyu*) in her *kurashi.* Her interest has never been to make a large profit from her indigo dying and weaving business, rather, her focus is on crafting her ideal *kurashi*. She receives income from the program plus any business profits she makes gives her additional income without the pressures of relying on business profit to sustain her livelihood.

By receiving a minimum basic income in a state-led program that is not conditional on the type of work she does, she feels a sense of *temporal freedom*. Through basic income support, her time follows a degrowth logic decoupled from capitalism's organization of temporality. During my lunch at her home she excitedly stated, " I can do what I like and do anything I like. I don't have to go into the office or work. 24 hours are mine!"

I view this state-led program as a form of Universal Basic Income [8] because urban migrants receive a liveable monthly income to pursue their own interests. Basic income allows urban migrants such as Shiori-san to "detach livelihood from work" (Graeber 2018:279). Advocates of degrowth call for basic income and have argued against critics who claim that people would become "free-loaders" who do nothing (Alexander 2015: 147). Shiori-san uses her 24 hours in a variety of meaningful ways, such as tending to her vegetable garden in the morning, helping others with the rice fields in the afternoon, weaving, growing indigo, cooking, and assisting elderly villagers within the community. She was not the exception, rather the norm for those receiving a basic income in the program in which urban migrants used their time in a variety of ways.

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[7] Rural Revitalization Cooperation Program salaries are slightly different among different local governments and depending on which year an urban migrant enrolled in. Currently in Nishiawakura, the monthly salary is 240,000 yen ($1800) plus support for the operation of their for businesses. Salaries on the high end are estimated at 2.8 million yen ($20,000) a year, but some local governments provide up to 50,000 yen ($400) in housing support, rental car support, and business equipment support.

[8] Universal Basic Income (UBI) has only been implemented as short term experiments in different countries. There is currently no formal UBI program, however, the rural revitalization cooperation program in Japan meets the main criteria of UBI and gives up to 5 years of support. A two year UBI experiment in Stockton, California during the pandemic showed that UBI had positive impacts on well-being and decreased anxiety, depression (Treisman 2021).

Unlike Murakami-san, her conditions of possibility when it comes to *kurashi* are state-backed. The program which funds up to 3 years of support was extended to 5 years due to the pandemic. However, she worries about what to do after the program because many who end the program end up leaving the village because without a basic income from the government they are unable to solely rely on their business profits to sustain their livelihoods. When I inquired about what she will do at the end of the program, she told me her plan was to work a part-time job and continue living in the countryside. She stated, "After I could work at the program I can get a part-time job. I want to be able to do cooking and make the inside of my home the way I want...I just want to enjoy *kurashi* and if I could find a way to just do that then that's enough for me [*kurashi jitai o tanoshinde ikite dikireba sorede ii*]." Shiori-san, similar to Murakami-san, engages in an "ethics of enoughness" (Buell 2014: 8) in which living simply is enough. Her ideal lifestyle is to be self-sufficient (*jikyūjisoku*) like Murakami-san, which means a lifestyle not reliant on making money to live well. Many urban migrants, such as Shiori-san, were creating lifestyles that no longer centered around capitalist productivity, thus giving them the opportunity to experiment with different relations to money and use of time. Eventually she would like to have a wood-fire stove to enjoy a slower and self-sufficient kurashi. Through living simply, urban migrants take an "oppositional living strategy" (Alexander 2011:2) against capitalist growth by figuring out *what is enough* in their kurashi. However, their situations were still precarious because their kurashi was state-backed with a clear end date looming in sight.

The lives of urban migrants also included downscaling in regards to material consumption. Murakami-san lives a consciously aware life in which he asks himself what he truly needs. Although, during Japan's period of economic growth the narrative was that happiness was equated to increased material consumption, Murakami-san has downscaled according to what he can care for. During our discussion at lunch he stated the importance of being consciously aware of this:

> When you have things [*mono*], what is difficult is the maintenance later on. If you can care for your things then it is okay. I think each person has their own way of living and they need to figure out what they can manage. I am not saying everyone should live a minimalist life. It is up to each person on what you need and don't need. If you just don't think then you accumulate and consume things, which becomes a problem. So you need to think 'is this necessary?' then there is no issue. But if you don't have this awareness you consume a lot of stuff then that makes life difficult. It becomes an issue when people

> don't like to care for things and then still consume a lot. If I am not careful then I could have more stuff -- that is my personality [he chuckled].

With fewer things, he has been able to care for objects longer and collect things that he finds attractive in crafting the atmosphere he wants to make in his home. In the end, looking back compared to his friends who remained salarymen he believes his downscaling has created a meaningful life and joy. As he gets older, he has reassessed what he can manage and care for resulting in further downscaling. Every object in his house has a place and function in his lifestyle, which he has mostly gotten from the Kuru Kuru shop or made himself. The Kuru Kuru shop is a space in which Kamikatsu residents can put unused objects in what appears to be a store, but one from which anyone is welcome to take items for free. *Kuru kuru* means "circular" in Japanese and many urban migrants downscaled by shifting from linear to circular patterns of consumption, in which objects became embedded within relations of reciprocity and care. My roommate's home was largely furnished using items from the Kuru Kuru shop. However, if they no longer needed the item, urban migrants such as my roommate often went back to return the item to the Kuru Kuru shop.

During my dinner conversation with Haruna, an I-turner in her early 20s who moved to Kamikatsu during the pandemic and funded by the rural revitalization program, she spoke about her ideal kurashi in terms of a circular life cycle. Her apartment was furnished with plateware from the Kuru Kuru shop and things she had made herself, such as a handwoven coaster made from rice straw. We ate a hotpot dinner full of local veggies and local tea she had received from an elderly neighbor. When I asked her about her dream *kurashi,* she replied:

> I want a wooden house. My dream is to live in the forest without money and to not work like Murakami-san. I want to live in an old home surrounded by the woods. A place where anyone could come in as well...like a library. They could bring a book, cook, drink tea, and then leave. If I was living there alone, no one would probably find me so I want everything to return to the soil, including myself.

Instead of a linear way of thinking about happiness, urban migrants such as Haruna aspire to similar values as Murakami-san, as they *downsize* their lifestyles and shift towards *circular* ways of thinking. However, as urban migrants craft *kurashi* aligned to degrowth, it is still unclear what

"shadow ecologies" (Dauvergne 1997) such lifestyles may rely on as migrants try to disconnect with the logics of capitalism.

The Inconveniences in Happiness

"I want to live at the speed of walking," said Murakami-san as he taught me and the other urban migrants how to light the fire to cook lunch. During my visits to his home, it was clear his life revolved around other transactions and temporalities outside of the rhythms of capitalism. Most would say his life is *fuben* (inconvenient) as he does not own many basic items, such as a car and refrigerator. His reasons for making such decisions are tied to money and temporality. To live faster would be to rely on conveniences, such as the purchase of a car, which would cost him money and change the speed of his lifestyle. Instead of gas or electricity he chose to source energy from firewood. Murakami-san also recognizes what Eriksen (2014) calls "the double-bind" in which we cannot have both growth and sustainability at the same time. Murakami-san explained, "If I owned a car I would live at the speed of the car. I want to live at the speed of walking. If we think about living at the speed of walking in other aspects such as energy consumption, to live at the speed of a moving car while also maintaining a lifestyle around firewood would leave me feeling uneasy."

Behind his own house is a forest from which he collects fallen branches and leaves for firewood. But even his collection of firewood follows the seasons. He can only use firewood that is dry, and thus during the summer and fall months he collects, dries, and then stores the firewood. While I assisted with starting the fire for lunch, he took some small branches and leaves slowly putting them under the clay oven, which he had built himself. "Gently blow air," he instructed. There was a low pitched hum as I blew through the hollow wooden stick to light the fire. The fire came alive and crackled into a strong open flame. As an urbanite myself, in that moment I discovered the joy in the *taiken* (experience) of creating a fire. He attributes living at the pace of walking as a "*tanoshi*" (joyful) and "*omoshiroi*" (interesting) kurashi.

In a similar way, the Zen Buddhist monk, Shunmyo Masuno, comments on cultivating happiness by taking time and effort to make a delicious cup of coffee. Instead of taking shortcuts such as drinking instant coffee or using a coffee maker, he asks us to slow down by making the coffee from scratch. In his book *The Art of Simple Living* he writes:

> Coffee brewed this way is likely to taste much better than coffee from a machine. The reason why, perhaps, is because each step in the process has been brought to life—collecting firewood, starting the fire, grinding the beans. There is nothing extraneous in any of these actions. That is what I call living. Life requires time and effort. That is to say, when we eliminate time and effort, we eliminate life's pleasures. Every so often, experience the flip side of convenience. (Masuno 2019: 28)

For urban migrants, cities such as Tokyo are places of convenience (*benri*), while the countryside was experienced as more often inconvenient (*fuben*). My interlocutors who were young urban migrants usually described their first encounter with the inconveniences of rurality in the fact that there were no *konbini* (convenience stores), such as 7-Eleven, Family Mart, and Lawson. The Japanese *konbini* emerged during the post-war period and modeled after Western style convenience stores. Today, with over 50,0000 shops across Japan, the *kobini* has become an "everyday institution" in contemporary life centered around the value of convenience (Whitelaw 2018). In addition to ready-made meals and snacks, you can buy groceries and stationery as well as pay bills, send luggage, access a printer and free wifi. Because the Japanese *konbini* is open 24 hours it is truly a place of convenience and an essential part of urban life in Japan. Both villages I resided in did not have a *konbini*. The village town hall in Nishiawakura surveyed residents on what they wanted in the village and having a *konbini* was the top choice. However, many urban migrants who settled into rural life changed their ways of thinking and relationships when it came to convenience and inconvenience. Regularly, rumors would swirl around that the village would bring in a *konbini* which ignited heated debates on kurashi in the countryside. Many urban migrants told me that when they first arrived in the villages, they wanted a *konbini* and did not know how to live without one. However, they changed their minds after learning to discover the "joys to be found in the inconveniences of the countryside" [*inaka no fubensa o tanoshimu*]. When conveniences were not available to them they often adapted and found other ways to meet their needs.

Although most urban migrants would not go as far as Murakami-san in his lifestyle, they sought ways to craft a way of living that embraced joy in the inconveniences of village life. Due to the lack of physical shops in the village many noticed an overall decrease in their consumption and gained a greater awareness of their previous consumption habits, which informed the lifestyles they wanted to create. However, many found enjoyment in simple pleasures such as taking walks, bike rides, creating art, growing vegetables, making things with their hands,

repairing broken objects, and upcycling. For example, in Nishiawakura an urban migrant I met found joy in repairing items. He was in the process of creating a repair cafe in an abandoned shed so that residents could repair broken objects together and do woodwork. Taking the more inconvenient route takes time and effort, but ultimately many found joy and value in the processes in doing things themselves instead of taking shortcuts.

During the fall of 2021, my roommate, Nana, who is an urban migrant in her 20s, invited me to help with the rice harvest alongside Kasumi-san, an I-turner in her 40s. They had been growing an heirloom grain variety of rice alongside the standard variety known as *koshihikari*. When I arrived at the rice terraces, golden stalks of rice hung from wooden racks drying under the sun. Today, most farmers in Japan use machines to dry the rice because it is more time efficient. However, urban migrants in Kamikatsu choose the slower way of drying rice under the sun. We pulled stalky bundles of rice off the wooden racks and pushed them into a small machine that separated the grains, leaving behind a trail of golden straw. As we all peered into the machine to see how much rice was produced a local farmer turned to Kasumi-san and said, "You probably have about one bowl of rice here." "Ehhh, just a bowl of rice? This is all that we got?" Kasumi-san replied in shock and started laughing. A number of factors were in play such as deer that had eaten the rice and also the difficulties in raising the heirloom rice variety. However, when Nana arrived to drop off her sister, they both looked delighted to see all the rice straw left behind. She and other urban migrants were excited to use the rice straw for their vegetable gardens, but also to create something out of the straw such as new year decorations.

During dinners, urban migrants who had engaged in helping with farming gained a newfound appreciation for rice as they were able to experience the entire process from start to finish. Despite the failure in producing enough rice, they still enjoyed the process and gained a valuable learning experience through the more inconvenient ways of living. Such failures reminded me of Murakami-san's conversation on how he had failed four times in building his clay oven before succeeding on his fifth try. However, it was the process in which he emphasized one finds joy (*tanoshimi*) and also the experience itself of making something that cultivates a more consciously aware way of living rather than using money to buy a product or service.

Over my lunch at Murakami-san's home, our conversation turned to Nana's *akiya* (vacant house) renovation project. She and two other urban migrants in their 20s had found an *akiya* in which they wanted to renovate it into a shared community space to host visitors who came to the

village. However, she found the project intimidating because it was something they have never done before and the home was severely dilapidated. Murakami-san advised her on different options. The first option was to use money to pay a professional to do the renovation task, resulting in a move-in ready space. The second option was to take a do-it-yourself approach by doing the renovation themselves. He emphasized that this inconvenient option would take time, but they would gain experience and pleasure in the process. He stated, "Everyone has knowledge, but just with knowledge is not enough. You need experience and that becomes wisdom." His face lit up as he asked Nana about the story she wanted out of the renovation process. He asked her, "So what type of story do you want through this renovation? That is something you should think about. Maybe the story is...three girls in their 20s *without* using money renovate a house and create the house with their own hands. See that's a nice story! In this story, what would be the difficult or hard part?" "Many things are difficult," Nana replied. To which Murakami-san stated:

> The biggest problem is time [*jikan*]. If you have time then you can do it. But how much time do you have? Do you want to hurry up and live in it? Do you want to enjoy the renovation process? If you do it without thinking about this part though then you will get frustrated. The value is in time. There are many ways to enjoy things in life. The finished end result is not the enjoyment [*tanoshimi*], it is in the process. If you just focus on the end result then you lose the enjoyment.

Marchand (2021) examines the relationship between pleasure, pain, and pursuit in what makes craftwork a meaningful experience. His study of woodworkers in England shows craftwork as an embodied experience in which "The swap of things for experiences was a form of resistance to materialist capitalism and, for many, a strategy to securing more personal control over achieving contentment, fulfillment, connectedness or happiness" (2021: 333). Crafting *kurashi* is significant because it is both a skill and an art form that takes time and effort. On the topic of pleasure and work, Marchand (2021: 325) argues for the importance of craftwork that is central to kurashi because it "nurtures the development of the whole person-- intellectually, physically, and spiritually" and "endows individuals with the skillset to engage practically and thoughtfully with the world, and to make it a better place." For urban migrants, taking the more inconvenient path such as growing organic rice themselves or taking on a DIY project allowed for slowing down and to find joy in such activities. By doing so, urban migrants take part in a

form of resistance against the accelerated rhythm and shortcuts within an "overheated world" (Erikson 2016).

Relational Meaning

Even Murakami-san, a highly self-sufficient individual, received help from others as he created his own kurashi in Kamikatsu, such as learning how to grow a vegetable garden and receiving help to clear his vacant home that was full of rubbish. At the same time Murakami-san describes what many other I-turners echoed, which was that the distance between social relations in the village were "just right." Whereas U-turners or visiting relatives from the villages spoke about the burdens of returning because they found social relations to be too close. As a result unlike I-turners, they felt more pressure and less freedom in rural living. In comparison to Tokyo, where my interlocutors described being anonymous, they had entered much more intimate social relations of kin. Some interlocutors described social relations as "*mendokusai*" (a hassle) at times, however, they emphasized the importance of the social relations with other villagers as integral to reshaping their *kurashi.* Unlike the city life in Tokyo, urban migrants could no longer be anonymous, which fostered their alienation; instead, their rural lives became dependent on *reciprocity*. From sharing car rides, eating meals together, and exchanging in ways to help each other in the village, such convivial activities fostered meaning-making in the lives of urban migrants in which a sense of meaning was co-constructed in relation with others. Anthropologist Chikako Ozawa-de Silva (2021: 208) calls this "relational-meaning" in which "a person's sense of value and sense of purpose and meaning in life is constructed socially and depends largely on feeling that their life is meaningful in the eyes of others."

During the Fall of 2021, I was in Nishiawakura accompanied by my friend Yuko visiting me from the city of Kobe. I had arranged for us to stop by and say hello to Shiori-san who was working in the rice fields. We had arrived at the rice fields and I saw Shiori-san once again working along-side local elderly in the harvesting of rice. We watched them with towels draped around their necks to catch the sweat rolling down their faces as they leaned over to cut rice under the sun. Otsu-san, a local elderly grandpa in the village, turned to my friend Yoko and began asking her questions about her background. However, my friend stood frozen and unable to answer due to her inability to understand his strong dialect. Immediately Shiori-san stepped in as a translator, "I've gotten used to the dialect after living here. I also didn't know what anyone

was saying when I first arrived in the village! Let's take a lunch break, follow me." Otsu-san looked pleased to see Shiori-san's ability to translate who just a year ago did not understand his dialect. We proceeded to follow Shiori-san down from the rice fields to the main road arriving at an old home for lunch. Yoko was excited because eating at other people's homes was uncommon in her urban life. Shiori-san slid open the already unlocked entrance and entered first then gestured for us to come in. "Welcome home. You can come inside. I say this as if it were my own home," Shiori-san chuckled. We followed her into the kitchen where we were greeted by a petite elderly Japanese woman named Yoshiko-san wearing a blue apron over her checkered shirt. Shiori-san turned to us and stated, "This is my mom. [*watashi no okasan desu*]." Yoko looked confused and asked, "She is your mom? Like your actual mom?" Shiori-san laughed and said, "Oh no. She is my village mom."

The lunch was a feast that included croquettes, noodles, pickled vegetables, rice, and side dishes overflowing the table with food. Soon Yoshiko-san's husband Otsu-san and his brother joined us. It was clear that Shiori-san was part of the household's family even though she was not a blood relative and had no previous ties to the village. During lunch we also became included into the family as we brought our hands together saying "*itadakimasu*", a Japanese phrase and custom to show thanks for receiving a meal prior to eating. I asked Yoshiko-san if the rice fields were all under their household ownership. Yoshiko-san explained that the rice fields were not theirs, rather they were helping to care for the fields for families in the village who could no longer manage their fields due to age or not residing in the village. Yoko asked if they received money managing the rice fields or if they paid a fee to rent the fields. Yoshiko-san explained that it was all volunteer service and no money was involved. Yoshiko-san stated, "We return with the feeling of care" and to "help others." Reciprocal relations centered around care were vital to social life in the village. In particular, with the absence of U-turners, it was I-turners who renewed reciprocal relations and forms of care that had been abandoned due to depopulation.

I-turners, such as Shiori-san and others I met, had no family ties or previous connection to the villages. However, they often entered into kinship relations as they engaged in reciprocal care practices. For many elderly residents, their own children had not returned to the villages; however, they entered into new relations of care and kinship with I-turners. As a result, meaningful *kurashi* became "relationally-oriented" (Silva 2021). For Yoshiko-san she took care of Shiori-san because there are many things about living in the countryside, which require

relying on the help of others. Yoshiko-san stated, "It is *fuben* [inconvenient] here, but you are connected to people here and we help each other out". For example, the family has given Shiori-san material resources such as their family greenhouse to help with her indigo business, but they also have taught her skills and shared knowledge on how to begin farming, thus her kurashi has been co-constructed with other villagers and not a solo project. In exchange, Shiori-san helps the family with caring for the rice fields. The Otsu family and Shiori-san receive rice in exchange for helping care for the abandoned rice fields. For Shiori-san, she states that Yoshiko-san is both her "mother" (*okasan*) and "friend" (*tomodachi*). They cook together, eat together, and take care of the rice fields together, and have created a new form of kinship in the depopulated village. Such convivial activities create intimate "kinning" relations (Howell 2003).

Without their meaningful kinship relationship Shiori-san and Yoshiko-san said they would feel "lonely." Local villagers have expressed that such relations with I-turners have "changed their lives" as they co-construct ways of living together in villages that have largely been abandoned. inning was a process enacted through acts of reciprocity and obligation. Although urban migrants valued their newfound freedom and individualism in the villages this was challenged by the importance of reciprocity in the village. Reciprocity, as Mauss (1950) shows in *The Gift,* is set within duties of obligation including: the obligation to give, the obligation, and the obligation to reciprocate. However, in the context of degrowth this becomes tricky for urban migrants who are accustomed to forms of exchange based on money, which requires less consciousness about social relations of reciprocity and obligation.

Kurashi as relationally-oriented was especially emphasized during my interactions with Tomoko, an I-turner in her early 20s, who had moved to Kamikatsu right after university. She decided to come to the countryside for her first job as "chief environmental officer" in a new start-up that owns a zero waste hotel in the village. During university she became concerned about issues of mass production and consumption in fashion. She wanted to know what was going on in the "background" to make clothing cheap in price. Her university field trips included outings to the countryside where she saw many different ways to live (*kurashi)* that did not revolve around consumption and money. On the topic of *kurashi* she stated, "In my life, I want to treat relationships in *kurashi* as precious. This includes my relationship to both objects and people. The thing that has the most value are relationships because it is something that you build with others. It can not be built alone."

She is in the midst of finding hints in the countryside on zero-waste living through her daily living and relationships in the village to shape her ideal *kurashi*. Furthermore, she does not want to pay money to enjoy time, rather she wants to create a "place of belonging" [*iibasho*]. Currently, she is working with Nana on the vacant house renovation project. During our dinner together she showed me pictures of her with Murakami-san mapping out renovation ideas, she shared, "I wanted to make a shared house. To create a place where people can gather and just eat like this with visitors. I could say let's go eat and pay for the experience, but I don't like to pay money to enjoy time. So I want to create a place that can be used freely for us to gather and then part ways when we feel." For urban migrants disillusioned by capitalism, their utopian ideal revolves around convivial activities outside of monetary transactions. From eating together, helping one another, and receiving mentorship from other villagers, urban migrants sought out intrinsic value as a way to reconnect with joy. However, such an ideal comes with a new set of obligations centered around reciprocity. As urban migrants reclaim a sense of meaning in their lives they do so not in solitary ways, rather meaning is relationally-oriented as they co-construct kurashi with other villagers.

Conclusion:

In this chapter, I have shown how urban migrants craft *kurashi* in ways aligned to degrowth values centered around living simply. As urban migrants are guided by a utopian vision in which kurashi is not organized primarily by monetary value, such as increasing incomes and consumption lifestyles, they enacted new ways of living that required a rebalancing of urban-rural ways of living in which "just enough is plenty" (Alexander 2011). However, living simply outside of capitalist logics centered on money exchange, required urban migrants to enter new relations based on reciprocity and obligations with others. Thus, when degrowth takes place on the ground, reciprocity and kinning become of significance as urban migrants break away from capitalist lifestyles. This chapter also points to a changing of values not centered around money and capitalist consumption, which also plays a role in the redefining of *yutaka* (prosperity). Prosperity is being redefined as something that cannot be measured with money. In the next chapter, I circle back to the theme of prosperity. I show that the meaning of *yutaka* future has shifted away from individual financial wealth in post-growth Japan. I examine how

urban migrants and local governments are working together to enact a new vision of prosperity through rural revitalization activities.

Chapter 5

The 100 Year Forest: collective *yutaka* through multispecies repair

Figure 9. Rescued broadleaf trees

At the end of October, I saw a flier on the wall for a “Tree Rescue " event on the community board in the library in Nishiawakura. On the day of the event, I waited outside the town office where I was greeted by urban migrants, children, forestry workers, and the *son-cho* (village chief). We jumped into different cars and headed into the mountains. At the edge of a steep slope, we came to a stop. We got out of the car and walked to the edge of the forest. Using a rope tied to a tree, we climbed the mountain stepping into the lifeworld of trees. The forest was under the control of the new village commons and was an area that would soon be felled for timber. The event was intended to be one of many enactments of repair under the 100 Year Forest Vision. The initiative is designed to create a collectively-oriented *yutaka* (prosperous and abundant) future for the next generation. As detailed in Chapter 2, the post-war vision of prosperity while generating high economic growth, resulted in Japan’s biodiverse forests to be destroyed and replaced by a monoculture regime of *sugi* and *hinoki*. However, on this day villagers gathered to rescue baby broadleaf tree species that might be crushed during the felling

of sugi and hinoki for timber. Aside from the village chief, all the participants were urban migrants who had made an I-turn to the village in the past seven years. When we reached a flattened area in the mountain next to a stream we put our empty bags down and gathered around a forestry worker whos told us how to rescue a tree. We were told to pay attention to the gaps between sugi and hinoki to look for green broad leafy plants. With our small shovels we began gently lifting baby broadleaf trees out of the ground, transferring them into plastic pots. I asked the team leader what kind of tree, a sapling with flat green leaves, I had rescued to which he replied "*kuromoji*."

Kuromoji (Lindera umbellata) is a deciduous shrub tree, native to Japan's forests and long used in traditional medicine (Maeda et al. 2012). During Japan's postwar period, *kuromoji* and other broadleaves were removed as they were not part of the post-war vision of *yutaka*. Unlike the timber species: *sugi* (Japanese cedar) and *hinoki* (Japanese cypress), broadleaves had no economic value. Under the 100 Year Forest vision, broadleaves were seen as having ecological value and the capacity to repair the forest and generate multispecies prosperity. The broadleaf saplings we collected would be cared for and replanted in another part of the mountain in the spring to create a possible "patch" (Tsing et al. 2019) of ecological repair within the damaged landscape. However, the future shape of the regenerated forests through *mori-zukuri* (forest-making) still remained unclear and largely experimental.

In this chapter I continue my focus on the idea of a *yutaka* (prosperous) future at a different scale, specifically at the scale of the multispecies collective and its post-growth context. I do so by examining the rural revitalization agendas in Nishiawakura and its 100 Year Forest Initiative. I use John Knight's (1998) concept of "second life" to trace how the village has gone through multiple mutations and reimagination of the meaning of *yutaka* at both descriptive and discursive levels: from a village of decay to a depopulated village, and most recently, a "SDGs Future City."[9] In doing so, I examine revitalization activities as *future-making* practices in order to track the village's rebirth from a life of decay through the reimagination of the meaning of *yutaka*. While I saw that villagers had lost faith in the current model of capitalist growth, at the same time, based on my observations, they nevertheless sought to try their hand at creating a new sustainable model of living. However, future-making was often messy, open-ended, and

[9] A city defined by Sustainable Development Goals as a low-carbon society that is working towards resolving issues in an aging society to create sustainable and liveable cities. Following Japan's 3.11 disaster, the Japanese state launched the Future City Initiative in 2011 out of concern to create sustainable and resilient cities.

precarious. The shifting meaning and values tied to *yutaka* are key here, as I noticed a shift in values by the village government and residents. *Yutaka* was no longer about individual financial prosperity like in the post-war model, but rather a collective prosperity that relied on visions of multi-species well-being.

The forest was key to how the villagers tried to redefine prosperity, even as they confronted the struggles and tension that arise from multispecies worldmaking. In the post-war vision of *yutaka,* prosperity was supposed to create a direct line between national economic growth and wealth at the nuclear scale for individuals and their families. However, as I have shown earlier in this thesis, the promise of individual prosperity was ruptured, resulting in rural depopulation, abandonment, and a disruption to linear inheritance. I view *yutaka* in its contemporary moment as a vision of *repair* in post-growth Japan, in which prosperity is reimagined at more *collective* scales. I situate *repair* as an "in-between condition, waiting for a new life, available for new relationships and reconstitutions" (Martinez 2017: 349). Within this new paradigm of revitalization in an attempt for post-rupture repair -- decaying sugi and hinoki, broadleaf tree species, and other species --- have become collaborators for collective well-being and survival (Tsing 2015). How are villagers working towards collective repair in ecological decay? How is *yutaka* reshaped through multispecies collaboration?

Towards A New Commons

During the fall of 2021, I attended Nishiawakura's children's sports-health day, known as *undokai*, held at the junior high school. I was invited by urban migrants who had moved a number of years ago to the village with their two young daughters. When I arrived at the event, I saw parents and grandparents sitting under tents watching the kids prepare for the event. Music played through the speakers and a series of speeches from children and the village chief marked the start of the festivities. A few elderly attendees in attendance did not have grandchildren in the village, but nonetheless found comfort and joy in seeing the kids. Students, ranging in ages from 3 to 13 years old, formed straight lines across the field. The kids then broke into mixed-age teams. Unlike a typical undokai in a populous city, in Nishiawakura the lack of children means that teams must collaborate across different age groups. As one resident explained, "The event is about teamwork. What I like is that the older students look after the young students." Activities included relay races, tug of war, dances, and gymnastic formations. All students were

encouraged to clap and cheer for others regardless of whether they were members of opposite teams. Towards the end of the team competition, classical music began to play and the students calmly came together to do a choreographed dance in honor of the 100 Year Forest Initiative. An announcer narrated the story of the trees in relation to the growth of the village kids, while the students began to create tree formations with their bodies.

The speaker spoke about the growth of both trees and the village kids as being in a co-constitutive relationship, "The sugi and hinoki trees that grow straight and tall are supporting each individual person's life here." The students climbed on top of each other in a pyramid formation to represent forest growth. Others laid on their backs lifting their legs upwards towards the sky representing young trees. As students performed movements to mimic the growth of trees, the speaker continued to describe the "birth" of the 100 Year Forest vision as "raising" both a healthy forest and the village children who he called the "next generation." The healthy growth (*seicho*) of the forest would support the healthy growth of the kids and their "future" (*mirai*). The growth of a healthy forest was represented in the event as a collective effort as children worked together to form representations of trees and forest growth. Future-making was depicted as a collaborative effort between trees and humans and one that redefines *yutaka* in terms of well-being, autonomy, and collective prosperity.

Today, Nishiwakura is widely known for its 100 Year Forest Initiative that reimagines the forest not as a private asset, but as the village commons. The initiative emerged from the village's earlier resistance against the national municipal merging program. During my travels through other rural villages, most villages merged into larger cities, resulting in the loss of autonomy as their local governments disappeared and transferred to larger scales of governance, This has prevented merged villages from enacting new initiatives and ideas for revitalization. In contrast, Nishiawakura rejected to merge. Depopulated small towns in financially precarious positions and in social decline were encouraged to voluntarily merge into larger municipalities via a policy known as *Heisei Dai Gappe* (The Great Heisei Merger). From the perspective of the state, merging was a way to improve "financial efficiency" of smaller municipalities that had become seen as fiscal and social burdens (Nagano et al. 2020: 174). Financial incentives to merge and penalties, such as getting cut off from state subsidies, made merging a popular move for small municipalities (Kramer 2021; Rausch 2006). The Heisei Dai Gappe merging period occurred between the late 1990s to mid 2000s. The process of merging into a larger municipality

starts with the formation of a merging council, taking a vote to finalize the decision to merge, and then submitting an official application (Rausch 2006). Due to depopulation and a growing financial debt Nishiawakura joined a merging council. However, 58 percent of residents voted against merging to protect their local autonomy. In 2004 Nishiawakura left the merging council and rejected the option to merge.

In doing so, the village chose local autonomy and resisted against the state's financial incentives to merge. Thus, Nishiawakura's decision to not merge was pivotal in preserving local governance through the *yakuba* (village government), which allowed for the freedom to engage in rural revitalization in new ways. Because forests cover 93 percent of the landscape, the local government worked with villagers to reevaluate the forests' value as a possible resource for revitalization. Furthermore, 84 percent of the forest is *jinkorin* (artificial forest) -- a monoculture regime of sugi and hinoki -- planted during Japan's post-war growth period. Today, the trees are around 50-60 years old. The majority of the mountain ownership in the village was divided among private owners. Many of these owners have abandoned managing their forests as the promise of prosperity (*yutaka*) between the state and villagers was ruptured during the 1970s due to foreign imports, resulting in abandoned forests.

During a village orientation I attended, the former village chief of Nishiawakura expressed, "It was private ownership of the mountain that created this mess. We must move towards a shared landscape." As a way to survive and revive the village, in 2008 the village created the 100 Year Forest Initiative as a new vision of prosperity; one that moved away from individual prosperity towards collective prosperity. A "Commons Forest Fund" was created by the village government to collect small investments to buy forestry machinery. The focus was on collecting small investments starting at 50,000 yen ($370). The fund ended in 2019 after receiving 400 contributions. The initiative's aim is to create value out of 50-year-old decaying trees by caring for them so that they grow for another 50 years and longer. The long term vision includes creating a biodiverse forest by planting broadleaf tree-species, which were previously replaced during the postwar planting regime with the more economically valuable sugi and hinoki.

Through the initiative the village government has made contracts with private forest owners in which owners have entrusted their forests to be managed by the village government and urban migrants. Timber profits are split fifty-fifty between the forest owner and village

government. Contracts are 10 year agreements between the village and forest owner, but can be continuously renewed. Under the contract, the village maintains the forest and is able to group together larger areas of the mountains to build single roads in the mountains to create accessibility for maintaining and bringing down timber. However, nearly 40 percent of forest owners reside outside the village and in megacities, such as Tokyo and Osaka. The village has also been trying to track down these urban forest owners who often do not know they own part of a mountain in the village. As a result, in 2020 the village government created a Forest Trust Bank system in collaboration with Mitsui Bank in which the private forest owner entrusts their inheritance to the Forest Trust Bank, which allows the village to care for the forest including the thinning and cutting of trees for timber. Timber profits are again split between the urban forest owner and the village government. However, the private owner can also choose not to keep the benefits and instead give the benefits to their children.

An interlocutor working in the 100 Year Forest project stated that there were 1400 people who owned mountains in the village and they had contracts with 700 of the owners. The village has continued to work on tracking and contacting the 700 other forest owners, some of who do not reside in the village, to give rights to the village for management. Timber is sold and used by small businesses in the village called “local ventures" that are owned by urban migrants. During an interview with a village government staff in the environmental division, he stated the strategy was to, “Create 100 local ventures of 100 million yen rather than attracting one company of 10 billion yen.” Local ventures create various wood products for niche markets such as high-end furniture, preschool furniture, DIY wood flooring, which are sold to people and companies in cities. Other projects include a focus on using trees that are in decay as wood chips for biomass heating within the village and the construction of the village’s public buildings.

Although the goal is for local economic self-sufficiency a large part of the initiative relies on subsidies from the national government. As one urban migrant described the system to me it has become a “*hojokin* (subsidy) business” because the village government has created strategies to receive subsidies from the state, such as creating ways to increase the village population through the Rural Revitalization Cooperation which rewards the village with a larger budget from the state. David Harvey (1993:25) argues that “all ecological projects are simultaneously political-economic projects and vice versa.” Rural revitalization projects, such as the 100 Year Forest Initiative, function as both ecological and political-economic projects (Harvey 1993). As

the village government integrates private forests into the new village commons, new production flows using decaying trees are reimagined by urban migrants through local ventures to create circular economic growth to revive the village by reshaping the forests to spaces of diverse value. The shift of forest management into the new commons has been pivotal in allowing urban migrants to experiment with creating possible ecological patches of repair by reshaping forests futures.

The 100 Year Forest: visions of repair

"Brighten our forest, brighten our life, brighten our future!! -- Team Nishiawakura" was the rallying slogan in the orientation for new urban migrants in the village government hall. The village hall was a newly constructed building made out of local wood and furnished with locally made hinoki furniture. The village hall is jointly connected to the village public library where residents have access to books, free wifi, and community events. Downstairs is a wooden slide for kids to slide down into the children's library. Next to the children's library were more open spaces with hinoki tables and chairs that were often used for events, such as the children's cafe, which was created and led by the village children. The village hall-library project was one of the results from 100 Year Forest Initiative profits as the village reshaped itself from creating value out of decay to a model of sustainability.

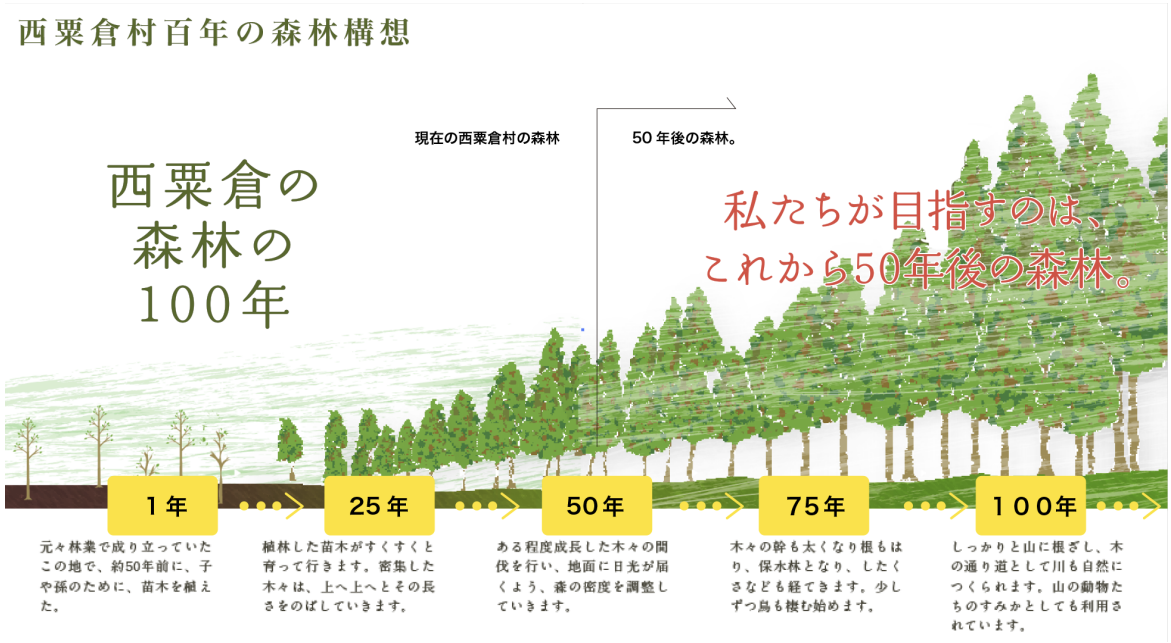


Figure 10. The 100 Year Forest project is depicted by simplified images of 50 year post-war trees that are transformed through renewed care into the vision of a healthy 100 year old forest. The captions describe the 100

Year Forest as a place with tree firmly rooted in the soil, development of undergrowth, returning of birds, revival of the rivers, and a place that brings back living creatures. Nishiawakura Village Office 2022

The new environment was sleek and modern, not what I had imagined for a depopulated rural village. The orientation was held in a large expansive room paneled all by wood. I took a seat among the urban migrants as we waited for the previous *son-cho* (village chief) to begin the village orientation and discussion. The discussion was co-moderated by Maki-san, an urban migrant who was the CEO of a local venture called A0. Maki-san, whose background is in forest ecology, was one of the urban migrants who has helped the village with creating the 100 Year Forest Initiative and the local venture incubator system called "Forest Local Venture School," which runs its operations out of a vacant elementary school. In his forest ecology studies, Maki-san researched how living creatures interact with each other to form a living forest, which has influenced his approach to rural revitalization. The term A0 refers to the rich nutrient topsoil in forests formed by the accumulation of dropped leaves. This A0 layer promotes a healthy environment for the growth of a variety of plants it also contributes to the health of rivers and animals. The mission of A0 is to function like this topsoil layer to create diverse value for the village economically, socially, and ecologically.

In his published book on reviving local rural economies, he coins the term "local venture" to describe a new form of entrepreneurship to bring in urban migrants, who he calls "seedlings," to be nurtured in the local venture school as they bring new new ideas and form "roots" in rural communities and grow in their own way (Daisuke 2018). In an interview Maki-san states, "*hito-zukuri* [person-making] and *mori-zuki* [forest-making] take time as each one is planted one by one and nurtured. We want to create a group that holds the desire to grow a forest over 50 years and over 100 years. What kind of future do we want to create?" (Through Me 2019). Here, we see that there is a shift from the uniformity of monoculture thinking towards diversity and assemblage. Gan and Tsing (2018:103) uses "assemblage" to inquire into "how entities in assemblage relate to each other" vital in multispecies worldmaking. Urban migrants and other species are imagined as an assemblage to reassemble Nishiawakura through dialectics of decay and renewal.

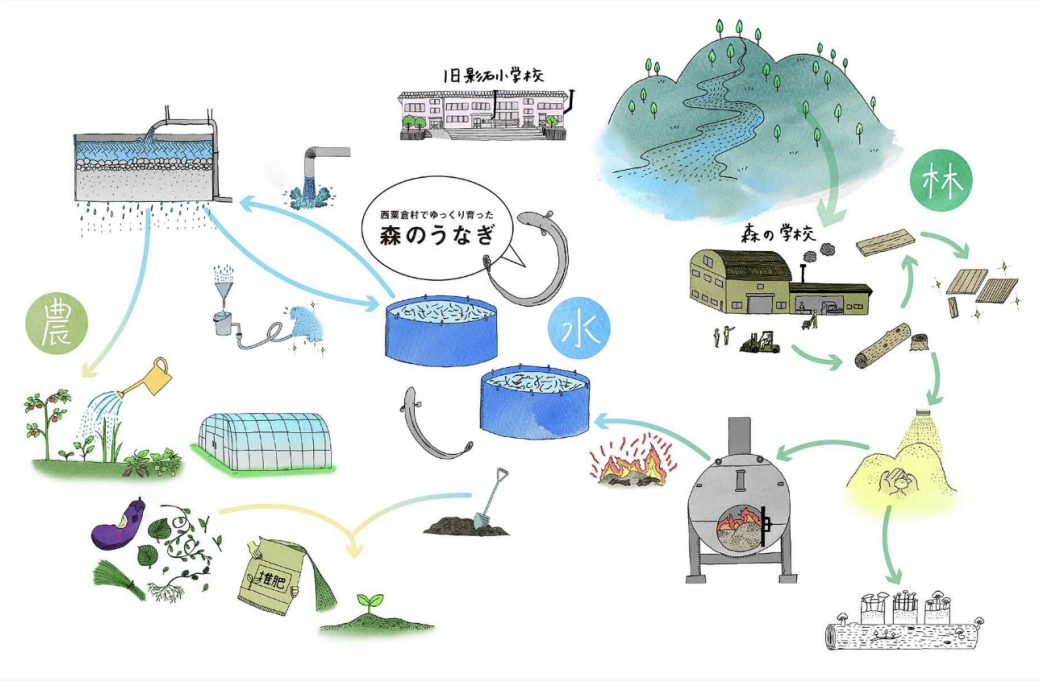


Figure 11. Trees entering circular economy logics created by A0 and the village. Source: Through Me 2019

The orientation in the village hall covered the history of the village including the decision to withdraw from the merging council, the ecological disaster of post-war forests, and the vision for creating a shared mountainscape in which urban migrants would be participants in reshaping the meaning of *yutaka*. They then opened the floor up for questions from urban migrants. Shun-san, an I-turner from Tokyo in his early 30s, stood up and took the mic. He told the former chief that he wanted to ask about *mori-zukuri* (forest-making) and his conflict with profit influencing his *mori-zukuri,* but also what the ideal biodiverse forest would look like. In 2020, Shun-san, his wife, and another urban migrant formed the “Bee Team" as part of a bee-keeping local venture under A0. Shun-san asked:

> The business we are doing is not just about selling honey, rather we want to produce honey that will contribute to the creation of a forest. We want to make high quality honey, sell that as a product, and then use the profits to circulate back into *mori-zukuri* [forest-making]. To increase the forest’s *tayosei* [biodiversity] and create a *tayosei-mori* [biodiverse forest]. And the diversity of honey will increase and create this type of cycle. What type of biodiverse forest should we make? I feel very confused about this. If I have the desire to increase honey then that would result in planting certain things and then we

> might create another problematic place. Perhaps we plant *koyouju* [broadleaf trees] and we just plant a bunch of different broadleaf species, but then we are not sure if that really matches the landscape. What is the *sugata* [form or shape] of a biodiverse forest?

The former village chief was unable to answer Shun-san's question about what a biodiverse forest should look like. Instead, his response focused on the unbalanced relationship between the mountains and rivers in the village as a place to start thinking in terms of repair. “There are not many fish anymore in our rivers. The *jinkorin* [artificial forest] does not provide nutrients for the soil because the leaves do not drop. We also need broadleaf trees, but even when we plant them they are eaten right away by the *shika* [deer]. How to increase biodiversity I am not sure, but we must try, " the former chief replied.

Granjou and Salazar (2016: 242) call *futures*: “the possibilities for shaping the *not yet.*” Planting is a form of future-making in what has *not yet* come, thus it is largely open-ended. Restoring healthy forest-river relations was also echoed during my interview with the current village chief. His vision of prosperity was expressed as a collective multispecies belonging through the restoration of forest-river relations. During our discussion on *yutaka* he stated:

> I want to *saisei* [revitalize] the river I had remembered growing up. The fish and *ikimono* [living creatures] have decreased in the river. When I was young there used to be small rivers by all the houses here. People put their *tambo* [rice fields] by the small rivers so that water would flow into the tambo. The *tambo* had to be next to a water source and have good sunlight. But the river also played an important part in our everyday life. As I child I used to go grab buckets of water from the river and put that in the bathtub. This was part of the responsibility of children back then. We also used to wash dishes and do laundry by the rivers. The river was a vital part of my life when I was young. Through my direct experience with the rivers I saw the living creatures and learned that the river is an amazing lifeworld. The small rivers flowed into the larger rivers and as I grew up I spent time in the larger rivers and was able to see the change in fish size. We used to play in the river. That was a charming world and I want to convey this to people.
>
> That’s why I want to use the 100 Year Forest plan to restore forest balance and create rivers that are not muddy and rivers where *ikimono* [living creatures] can return and live. Also, I want humans to experience this flow of living with *shizen* [nature] The current system and way of living we have will not last long term. I cannot see the way we live carrying on for hundreds of years. Humans want to control everything and control *shizen*. With advances in technology we have misunderstood that we can control nature. We

> cannot control *shizen*. I think now people are realizing that the way of thinking and path we have gone is wrong and a mistake. So for example don't put dams to control nature. You need to first understand *sakana no sekai* [the lifeworld of fish]. We have to see the relations between humans, trees, and rivers as interdependent and not as separate. I am not saying to go back to the past, but to keep parts that are important and evolve with the times. We cannot return back to the past, but how do we create a *shiwase* [happy] place for both humans and living creatures? We must treat living creatures as precious beings.

Human presence in the Japanese concept of *shizen* (nature) is vital to how ecological repair is understood and enacted in the village. Atsuro Morita states that it is more so in Japan that the "Western nature-culture dichotomy is far from intuitive" (Cadena et al. 2015). *Yutaka* imagined at its new collective scale is not understood as the removal of human presence; rather it is about creating repairs by entering multispecies relations through forest-making. Donna Haraway (2008: 244) states, "If we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming *with,* in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake." Core to ecological restoration in Japan is the role of people, which is especially evident in the concept of satoyama landscapes (Gan and Tsing 2018; Normile 2016; Tsing 2015). Whereas in the West, human absence is necessary for biodiversity, the biodiverse satoyama landscape is produced through "human management and intervention (including the introduction of plant and animal species)" (Knight 2010: 435). Satoyama is a creative engagement of human disturbance to forests that forms "a more-than-human architecture made through time" (Gan and Tsing 2018: 108)

It was not only monoculture, but depopulation that was viewed as destroying satoyama. My interlocutors described satoyama as "a place where the hands of humans are in *shizen* [nature]," thus they stated that depopulated areas of the village were no longer satoyama landscapes. The 100 Year Forest is a vision of satoyama repair, but not one imagined through Western notions of restoring biodiversity through conservation and rewilding in which human intervention is restrained to a minimum or removed (Drenthen 2016). Instead, the growth of the biodiverse 100 Year Forest is enacted in various ways by "becoming *with"* (Harraway 2008) other living creatures, one that required human presence. The goal was for a collective yutaka that included humans and other species, however, transforming the forest into a collective space for other living species to remedy for past mistakes is a difficult task in a damaged landscape.

A Liminal Space of Repair: decay, renewal and disruption in the forest

Forest management had recently been delegated to the local venture called *Hyakumori* (100 Forest). The small team was led by a group of urban migrants in their 20s through 40s with various backgrounds in forestry. It was an autumn day, cool but sunny with clear skies. I rode my bicycle to the Hyakumori office, which was located next to the village lumber yard. I had arranged to see the forest with one of its staff members. Mari-san, a petite woman in a forestry outfit and helmet appeared from the back of the office and greeted me. She appeared in her late 40s and made an I-turn to the village about 7 years ago with her husband and two kids. She studied forest sciences in college and later moved to the village because she wanted to help revive mountains that lacked the brand value in comparison to the forests in areas such as Miyama, Kyoto.[10]

"Put on your boots and take this helmet" she instructed me before getting into the car. I hopped into the passenger side next to her and we drove into the mountains. We drove up the unpaved road while she glanced at her village forest map. We made a right turn and went higher up into the mountains. Along the way she pointed out areas of the mountain dark with thinly growing trees, a sign of a neglected forest and one not contracted with the village. There are multiple factors at play in cases where there is no contract between a forest owner and the village. Some owners will refuse contracts, whether because of affective attachment to their forest, or the possibility of the return of high timber prices. Sometimes it is also politics, such as not liking the current village chief. Usually contracts held by the village required building rapport, multiple tea sessions, and talks with owners.

When we got out of the car, I put on my helmet, and we headed down the slippery slope of the mountain. There was more light entering this forest because it had been thinned of trees, a sign of human care and intervention. It seemed far from what I pictured as a healthy forest. However, Mari-san turned to me and said, "This is a *genki yama* [healthy mountain]." She explained that a good quality trees should be consistent in ring size and straight. The area we were in was mostly hinoki, and the larger ones between 50 to 60 years old. She showed me a cut wood stump and explained that the center of the tree ring did not align in the center of the stump, and the tree rings were not consistently spaced, which was a tree of poor quality and low timber

[10] Kyoto's forests were tied to the construction of the former imperial capital Heian-kyo. Timber sourced from Miyama is used to build Kyoto's shrines and temples thus elevating its value and status.

value. I was reminded of an interlocutor working in the *yakuba* who stated, "Low-value means there is a lack of care."

Andrew Matthews (2022: 57) stays attuned to the shapeshifting form of trees in his work chestnut tree in rural Italy and by doing so shows that tree morphologies "record social histories." The forest was still uniform with sugi and hinoki, but its history of abandonment was visible in the inconsistencies in tree stumps and crooked skinny tree trunks. I asked her why some of the trees looked so lifeless. She explained that if the area is not properly thinned then it would result in competing growth [*seicho no kyoso*] due to the density of trees competing with each other in taking energy. Furthermore, by not felling trees as other interlocutors explained the soil was unstable and prone to mudslides.

In the distance, I saw two forestry workers thinning the forest by cutting down trees with their chainsaws. "We can't get any closer because forestry is dangerous work" she stated and instructed me to not go any closer. I could hear the loud chainsaw motors in the distance, then the cracking of the tree as it leaned over and then crashed with a loud boom on the ground. This was not the end of life for the tree, rather its collapse was the tree's rite of passage into its "second life" (Knight 1998). Knight (1998) uses the concept "the second life of trees" to discuss the continuity of the Japanese family household (*ie)* and inheritance system through family-owned forests. This continuity was expressed through generational care of their forests in which "the human life-course is imagined, but in a way that exceeds the biological lives of family members in favor of a more enduring sense of the family" (Knight 1998: 214). Matured trees were then felled as they entered their second lives as "durable wooden houses" in which "family continuity is imagined in terms of durable wood" (Knight 1998: 214). However, Knight (1998: 214) argues that the post-war monoculture forests were denied a "second life as family timber" due to depopulated villages resulting in "age of heirlessness" and abandonment.

In Nishiawakura, forests contracted to the village are cared for by urban migrants, often I-turners, who have no family connection to the forests. Under the 100 Year Forest Initiative the continuity of the second life of trees is not through the scale of the *ie* (Japanese family household), rather contracted forests are in new relations with urban migrants who reimagine collective value and possibility. The neglected sugi and hinoki entered into their second lives as part of the village's "circular economy" (*mawaru-keizai*) which was imagined as a way for the village to achieve future local self-sufficiency and an eventual break from state subsidies. The

local government and urban migrants have reimagined possibilities out of the decay, including biomass energy for the village's district heating system, public buildings, future housing and more under the village's new agenda of sustainability. By clearing the forest of 50 year old trees, light enters the forest, which creates conditions and room for new life to emerge. For example, red pine and matsutake have thrived within deforested patches of Japan's mountainscape (Gan and Tsing 2018). They argue, "The matsutake in Japan is a human commensal and cannot flourish without humans" (Gan and Tsing 2018: 244). However, depopulation disrupts multispecies relations between humans, red pines, and matsutake by removing the presence of villagers who felled trees.

The village government and urban migrants have recently introduced broadleaf tree species into contracted forests. However, national forestry policy continues to provide subsidies for the planting of hinoki and sugi and not for other tree species. Mari-san stated, "The state has a rule that when you cut down a tree you have to replant with hinoki or sugi. The state provides subsidies for the replanting of sugi and hinoki, however, we do not receive money for planting other tree species such as broadleaf trees which we want to experiment with." Despite not receiving subsidies, the village government with the help of urban migrants has attempted to plant broad leaf trees and also transplants baby broadleaf trees rescued before the thinning of forests that would otherwise be crushed.

During my walk with Mari-san I came across a bone in the forest. She explained it was the bone of a *shika* deer (Cervus nippon). It was not only human presence shaping the forest, but I had learned deer were also active agents in reshaping the forest. Villagers were negotiating a new forest by planting futures to create biodiverse patches in the landscape. However, deer have disrupted second life enactments carried out by villagers in the making of the 100 Year Forest vision.

Figure 12. Deer bones

Mari-san drove us to the other side of the village, past the onsen now owned by an urban migrant who used leftover wood to heat the hot springs, and then continued up the road. On the way we saw Naka-san, a local forest owner in his 70s who has a 100 Year Forest contract with the village. Currently, his forest is cared for by the local venture on behalf of the village government and there was discussion about planting broadleaf trees to create a forest in the future for the village kids to play in. Mari-san stopped the car and Naka-san greeted us with chocolates. We then kept driving up the mountain and took a right turn onto a narrow road that led into the forest. When we reached a high point in the mountain. She stopped the car and we got out.

The forest area we reached was also part of the village commons and now an area of tree planting. “We planted a new sugi variety here that has less pollen because of *kafunsho* [sugi hay fever],” she stated. Sugi hay fever was one of the “feral effects” (Tsing 2022) of the monoculture forests. Allergies to sugi pollen started to become prominent during the 1980s following the mass planting of sugi (Efron 1998). During spring, it is common to see people wearing masks to lessen the severity of their exposure to sugi pollen and those with allergies often presented symptoms such as itchy and watery eyes, nasal congestion, and sneezing. The young sugi were each individually wrapped in plastic and a netted fencing enclosed the area to protect the trees from deer. “The deer have eaten all our newly planted trees” she stated in dismay. She turned and then pointed to a barren shrub area where they had also planted broadleaf trees eaten by deer.

Although her team has attempted several times to plant broadleaf trees they have all been eaten by deer.

Figure 13. New tree plantings

Across Japan the deer population has boomed (Noguchi 2017), which villagers have attributed to the lack of predators, such as wolves which are now extinct, the decline in hunters, and the lack of food created by monoculture forests planted during the post-war period. Elderly residents recalled 30 years ago they rarely saw deer, however today sightings of deer where people reside in the village are common, resulting in crop damage, vehicle collisions, loss of plant diversity, and even the killing of trees. Urban migrants in the village often joked that at night time it was a "shika party" because deer would be seen everywhere in front of homes and walking the streets. Despite plans to increase biodiversity and combat sugi hay fever, these efforts have all been swallowed up by hungry deer. Villagers believe that the deer in the monoculture forest no longer have food to eat, thus deer eat newly planted trees and even the bark sugi and hinoki for their own survival.

Mari-san's team has experimented with different solutions to protect the trees and ward off deer, however, all actions taken have been disrupted by deer who have eaten and damaged trees. In the introduction to the book *Domestication Gone Wild* (Lien et al. 2018) the authors

challenge the notion of domestication with human "mastery" and "control" over other species. Instead, they show humans are always entangled in the "blurry boundaries and messy interfaces" with "other-than-human relations" (Lien et al. 2018: 4). As villagers care for and plant trees, such enactments of ecological repair are embedded in multispecies relations that are unexpected and beyond the control of villagers. Acts of repair are situated in the "everyday micro-politics" (Martinez 2017) of the forest, as villagers negotiate forest-making with deer. Deer are not only eating trees, but they are also eating possible *yutaka* futures that have been planted into the ground. Planting futures is a precarious situation as villagers navigate hungry deer that now overpopulate the village.

Figure 14. Deer disruptions

Local Ventures: Urban migrants and bees as collaborators within post-war decay

In October 2021, I found myself in the passenger seat next to Ryoko-san, a member of the Bee Team managed under A0, the local venture. "There is no reception here because we are deep in the mountains" she told me as I glanced at my phone. During the ride, she recounted how she had been stung multiple times while tending to the bees and even landing in the hospital for anaphylactic shock. "The bees did nothing wrong and I had no clue that I was allergic!" she stated. A sense of anxiety creeped in as we approached the unfamiliar world of bees. I asked her why she wanted to work with bees, she joyfully replied:

> The population of bees is declining worldwide. I didn't know anything about how honey is produced. Bees are *chisai ikimono* [small living beings]. I wanted to understand the *mushi no sekai* [world of insects] or perhaps you could say the world of bees...the things

> we usually cannot see. The hardest part is that there are no flowers here and mostly sugi and hinoki. But we got 400 kg of honey this year and it felt like a success!

She pulled the car over to a small clearing in the forest where I saw the two other members of the Bee Team busy opening beehives for their daily health check. I put on my bee-keepers hat, but felt nervous about my exposed hands. She reassured me that I would be fine, "The weather is good today, so the bees will be in a good mood." We stepped over the electrical fence set up to keep out animals from the hives. I was surrounded by bees zipping around in all directions with a low buzz sound. I was greeted by her husband Shun-san and the youngest team member Naka-san. All three made an I-turn to the village in 2020 using the Rural Revitalization Cooperation Program and had no prior experience with bee-keeping.

Figure 15. I-turners bee-keeping

This was not the typical image of bee-keeping because we were in a monoculture forest with no flowers or other plants in sight. However, it was in this forest that the Bee Team, honey bees, and unseen broadleaf trees and plants were part of a "polyphonic assemblage" which Tsing (2015: 23-24) describes as the "open ended gathering" for "multispecies world-making." Although Tanaka-san had a previous background in zoology, Ryoko and Shun-san both had been

working in a Tokyo venture company together prior to their transition into the bee-keeping world. Their reasons for leaving were to pursue more meaningful work and to raise their two children in a "*yutaka*" environment closer to nature. Shun-san worked as a board member in the Tokyo venture for 8 years, but lost faith in the purpose of his work. He explained:

> We have come this far and yet capitalism has failed us, why? Humans and *shizen* [nature] were separated. In the city there is no shizen, but the city has everything we need that is made by shizen. It is a system of controlling shizen, but we are also part of nature's system. So we need to learn to live with shizen. We want our kids to grow up learning to be in partnership shizen because without that they will not become people contributing to making a place where people and shizen are in partnership.

Shun-san's disillusionment with capitalism has reshaped how the Bee Team runs their business. Their ultimate goal is to increase the biodiversity of forests in the village through their collaboration with bees. Unlike the post-war period of monoculture planting which removed biodiversity in the name of progress, Shun-san is guided by biodiversity which reorients his relationship to nature as being in a mutual partnership with *shizen*. Their concept is "Honey born from the forest will give birth to the forest." Profits made from honey sales are invested back into the forest for *mori-zukuri* [forest-making]. When I asked the team what type of mountain they wanted to create, he replied:

> We want to make a biodiverse forest [*taiyose mori*] of different plants and trees. We want the bees to produce honey in a healthy environment. When the bees are happy and healthy they will produce honey. We don't think about making delicious tasting honey. If you want sweet and clean tasting honey then you need to be in a place with many flowers or else you cannot have that. Then you would cut the forest and plant many flowers and that for me would be the current capitalist system. We want to create a forest to say "this is the taste of our forest." We wanted to participate in the 100 Year Forest and to get others involved in the community to help and change the mountain.

They have cared for their plot in the mountain by removing weeds, cleaning the trash from the ground, and planting clover. Although patches of plant diversity within the monoculture forest is largely unseen by villagers, the bees had found broadleaf trees and plants to pollinate and produce honey from including clover, *tochi* tree (Aesculus turbinata), and *kuraso zansho* tree

(Zanthoxylum ailanthoides). Profits made from honey are then circulated back to the creation of a biodiverse forest. As the Bee Team envisions a collective multispecies yutaka future that values biodiversity, similar to relations of kinship, they enter new relations centered around a "mutuality of being" in which urban migrants, bees, and trees "participate intrinsically in each other's existence" (Shalins 2011: 1).

Figure 16.

However, the team has introduced foreign honeybees (*seiyo-mitsubachi*) into the village. This has caused tensions with elderly residents who bee-keep with native Japanese bees (*Nihon-mitsubachi)*. Although the Bee Team wanted to use native Japanese bees they realized that the honey production would not be enough to create a livelihood and project that would sustain in the long term, as a result they decided to use foreign bees. These internal conflicts

around making enough profit to sustain, but also making a positive contribution to address environmental issues (*kankyo-mondai)* were often the case with my interlocutors.

The Bee Team is currently borrowing six areas of the mountains contracted with the village. Ryoko-san highlighted this tension with elderly bee-keepers in the village and stated, "There is someone who uses native Japanese bees here and he said 'don't enter here.' The team stated, "Finding a place for their beehives has been difficult due to fear of bees. Many people said the bees were dangerous. That they would sting people and even attract bears." Despite such tensions, the Bee Team sees the honeybees as feral collaborators in making a biodiverse forest. I use the term *feral collaborator* to build off the concept of "ferality" (Tsing et al. 2020) which is used to describe the beyond human control dynamics of more-than-human sociality. The Bee team's collaboration is feral as it too is a largely open-ended, unknown, and experimental project that relies on feral dynamics to create a possible biodiverse patch within the monoculture landscape. However, for elderly they feared potential feral consequences of such an experiment. Tsing and her colleagues (2020) state instead of placing ferality into a binary judgment of good versus bad, they suggest that it is more useful as "a descriptive characteristic of a more-than-human Anthropocene." The Bee Team is still unsure how to go about the best way to cultivate biodiversity, however, their boss Maki-san, shared with me his thoughts on multispecies collaboration. He stated:

> There are many areas of the mountain that would be better as a natural forest [*tennen-rin*]. For example, the areas of the mountain that are difficult for forestry vehicles to enter would be better to return to a natural forest. But bees can fly where cars cannot go and by returning to the forest it would benefit the bees and benefit other living creatures in the forest. They can fly 2 kilometers, pollinate plants, and receive gifts from the forest [*mori no megumi*]. I find that amazing. This might be a way to revive the ecosystem of the mountain by cutting sugi and hinoki trees down and letting the mountain regenerate itself. *Yamazukura*, *tochi,* and *sansho* are native plants to this area so there is a chance that birds will carry the seeds of such trees and drop them allowing for a biodiverse forest to naturally return. I want to make a forest for everyone to enjoy [tanoshimu].

For Maki-san, forest-making through multispecies encounters and disturbances extends into the "latent commons" (Tsing 2015). Tsing (2015: 255) defines the *latent commons* as the

"sites in which to seek allies" that are often elusive to people that have the potential for multispecies collaboration. She continues, "the latent commons is here and now, amidst the trouble. And humans are never fully in control" (Tsing 2015: 255). It is in such sites that there is the potential for the Bee Team to find collaboration towards biodiverse forest futures.

In Tsing's (2015) ethnography on the matsutake mushroom, she shows how the matsutake has thrived in capitalist ruin through ecological disturbances made by humans. She states, "Disturbance opens the terrain for transformative encounters, making new landscape assemblages possible" (Tsing 2015: 160). Following forest disturbance through the felling of sugi and hinoki, Maki-san sees a feral possibility in forests not easily accessible to humans as "latent commons" for multispecies worldmaking. The honey bees produce honey, a valuable gift from the forest as an economic resource, but also a signal of hope of the existence of other tree and plant species within the monoculture forest. Cultivating biodiversity futures in this case is neither hegemonic domestication guided by capitalist growth nor the hands off approach of rewilding to recreate undisturbed wilderness. Instead, multispecies worldmaking under the Bee local venture is more akin to "domestication-as-rewilding" (Tsing 2018: 248). *Mori-zukuri* in this case, the honey bees are mobile pollinators, birds are carriers of seeds of hope, and urban migrants are their collaborators all engaged to create the possibility of a biodiverse patch to regenerate within ecological ruin. However, how the 100 Year Forest will shapeshift through these enactments of repair is still an unknown future.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown a vital shift towards a new vision of a collective multispecies *yutaka* that is guided by biodiversity. Under the 100 Year Forest Initiative privately owned forests have entered the new village commons, which allows urban migrants to care for and reimagine possibility out of abandoned forests in decay. Local ventures create value out of post-war forest decay, not only in economic terms, but also ecological as evident through the attempts to repair the damaged landscape by planting broadleaf tree companions to sugi and hinoki. However, villagers are in constant negotiation with other living beings in the forest such as deer which have eaten newly planted futures. Furthermore, revitalization activities are enactments of growth, but not guided by capitalist growth which creates alienation as seen in the post-war monoculture planting period. The 100 Year Forest vision enacted through revitalization

activities by urban migrants points to a form of growth that is guided by ecological repair to cultivate biodiverse futures. However, creating biodiverse futures is not through the removal of human presence and disturbance from the mountainscape. Instead, villagers have stepped into more-than-human lifeworlds, which results in multispecies worldmaking that is open-ended, unknown, and immersive.

Epilogue

During my fieldwork, I visited the home of Haruki-san, the artist responsible for making the wooden Totoro in Nishiawakura. I rode my bicycle across the village until I found his home on a slope with a Totoro outside. The garage door entrance was open and I poked my head inside, “Hello, is anyone home?” I asked. There I saw Haruki-san walking towards me. “What brings you here?” he asked as I greeted him. I introduced myself and told him that I wanted to meet the person who made the Totoro. “Yes, that’s me,” he chuckled. Haruki-san, now in his mid 80s, was born and raised in Nishiawakura. “I will give you a tour of my place” he stated. We began walking along the edge of the rice paddy, which had golden rice stalks soon ready to be harvested. Next to the rice paddy was a well next to a pond of water. “This water is from the mountains, you need good water for growing healthy rice. These tadpoles in the pond make their way into the rice field, which is a sign of a healthy rice paddy,” he explained as I leaned forward to peer into the pond, catching a glimpse of the tadpoles swimming in different directions. I followed Haruki-san towards the forest behind the rice paddy, where I saw a large Totoro guarding a wooden gate. The gate opened up to an outdoor wooden stage. We climbed onto the stage and he opened a wooden door that had a record player and slipped the record’s needle onto a vinyl record. The lyrics to *After You’ve Gone* began to play through the wooden speakers:

> After you've gone and left me crying
> After you've gone there's no denying
> You'll feel blue, you'll feel sad
> You'll miss the dearest pal you've ever had...
> After you've gone, after you've gone away.

“Before the pandemic I held outdoor jazz concerts here” he stated as he stripped the needle off the record and closed the speaker system. We returned towards the main house where there were wooden Totoro speakers connected to a sound system he made himself. There was also an outdoor pizza oven, soba noodle-making shed, and small children’s playhouse that he had all made himself. Inside, his home was full of antiques such as cameras, clocks, and record players. Two beautiful paintings of clocks hung from the walls painted by Haruki-san, which signaled the

time his grandchildren were born. His home reflected his own kurashi that he had crafted carefully over the span of several decades to create a place of leisure.

-"Why did you make so many Totoro? Do you like Totoro?" I asked.
- "Oh no, it is not that I like Totoro. I made them for my grandchildren. They loved Totoro, so I started carving Totoro. Others in the village also wanted Totoro, so I just kept making them," he replied.

The home was built as a space for his son and grandchildren as much as it was for Haruki-san himself. However, his son has no intention of making a U-turn back to the village and as the grandchildren become older they have become rooted in their city lives. I found his home to be an enchanting oasis in the village, but I wondered what would happen to the place after Haruki-san was gone?

In the fall of 2022, I returned to the villages to meet with close friends I had made during my fieldwork. The air was chilly as it was already November. In Nishiawakura, I was greeted by Ritsuko and Masabu an elderly couple who had "kinned" me into their family. Upon my arrival they threw a surprise birthday dinner with a crab feast and birthday cake. The next day we drove to Haruki-san, whom they were very close with. Haruki-san was no longer as physically strong and dominant as I had once remembered. He had undergone cancer treatment and surgery, which had transformed his body. He was thin, his shoulders not as broad, and his cheeks sunken, but his lively strong spirit remained. "Come in, come in" he said as he stood next to the Totoro in front at the entrance. Inside his house, a number of men were organizing his 4,000 jazz records into neatly labeled stacks. Ritsuko, Masabu, and I sat down with Haruki-san at his table to drink coffee. Haruki-san had a close relationship with Maki-san and they were creating a plan for the future inheritance of the home to make it a collective village asset. "This will become a place for the village," said Haruki-san as he sipped his piping hot coffee. "I believe in Maki-san, he will make something happen for the village," Haruki-stated. The men in the house assisting Haruki-san were helping in organizing the home for the future transfer of the property that would be managed by A0 as a space for the village. The home with all its Totoro had become a beloved place by urban migrants and village children. I recalled how an I-turner couple described to me that Haruki-san treated their two daughters as his own grandchildren. They would come over and

play with the Totoro, tadpoles, music, and play in the small playhouse that he had built for his own grandchildren. When the time comes, the house will become part of the village commons as a space for important village guests to stay and open for village kids to play at. Outside in the rice field, Maki-san's friend Yoshi-san who made a recent I-turn to the village from Tokyo to work with A0 was plowing the rice paddy. Haruki-san had taught Yoshi-san how to grow and care for his organic rice field that was also part of the property. It seemed I had arrived during a critical period of transmission of knowledge to urban migrants who would continue on to collectively care for his home, Totoro, rice fields, and forests.

Haruki-san's Totoro were the reminders of the new seeds planted and cared for within the decay of rural Japan. As urban migrants moved into depopulated villages they acted as new seedlings to revitalize depopulated villages. A U-turner in Kamikatsu who owns a zero waste cafe captured the desire to create a new system within the village, "One thinking is the economic concept of *haku* [to be swallowed and spit out]. For example, even if we think of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as good, they are still within the context of a capitalist system which holds power. Then it gets swallowed in it [capitalist system]. So a sustainable cafe or a sustainable item might not be sustainable because it still moves money and the capitalist has swallowed it. But even if it gets swallowed by capitalism, if it can still make a connection to other ways out, then I think there is a new system we could make."

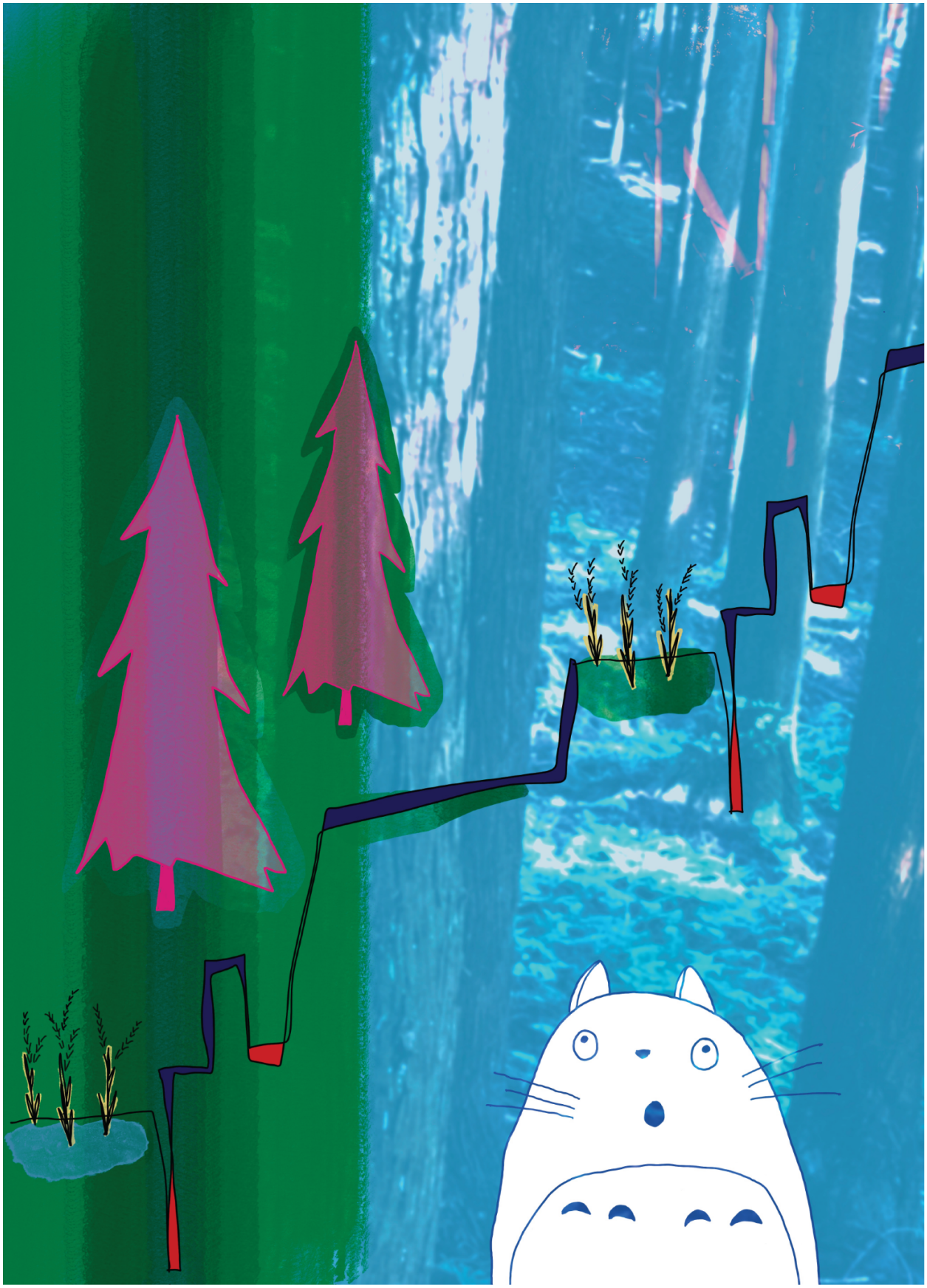
Japanese (De)growth: a model for the world to watch

As the third largest economy in the world, Japan's unsustainable success has been based on a neoliberal model of growth that has inversely led to a precarious nation. Although, Japan's rapid growth during the postwar era was viewed as an "economic miracle", what has followed since then is referred to as the "lost decade(s)" due to continued economic stagnation, depopulation, low birthrates, an aging society, and an unhappy population. I have shown that the nation's pro-growth model feeds off capital accumulation, but in doing so creates alienation at two scales: the satoyama and people. Within Japan's capitalist society, conformity and discipline have been key logics, but have contributed to decaying landscapes and an urban population that is increasingly hitting their utility limit. Younger generations, who never experienced Japan's economic miracle, have not inherited the *yutaka* future planted by early generations in the

postwar period. Disillusioned by capitalism, a growing number of urbanites have left cities and moved to the countryside in search of alternative ways of living.

I have shown that urban migrants are crafting lives guided by new values aligned to degrowth, reshaping the meaning of the good life in contemporary Japan. Rurality in Japan has become a site of experimentation for creating sustainable futures. I found a pushback against capitalism by urban migrants, but not a complete rejection of growth. Instead, what is emerging in rural Japan is a *reimagining of growth* as we know it. Within dynamics of (de)growth, rural revitalization is a form of precarious future-making situated within the dialectics of decay and renewal. The redefined *yutaka* is a vision of multispecies prosperity, but in reality it is messy and open-ended. I have shown that there is a return to the "arts of noticing" in landscapes, other species, reciprocity, local scales, downscaling, and circular logics within the new yutaka. However, (de)growth conditions unfolding in Japan are unique in that they have been made possible through backing by the state. Both the rebirth of villages into sustainable models and emerging alternative lifestyles are largely supported by state subsidy programs. A tension exists in terms of long term sustainability, as urban migrants must make transitions off of state subsidies and enter the more precarious and, for some, capitalist market situations that await.

Experiments in rural Japan point to a shift from crisis to multispecies repair suggesting hopeful possibilities in the Anthropocene. The world will be watching as Japan's future unfolds out of patchy repairs within capitalist ruins. Japan is once again a model for the rest of the world to watch as the country presents precarious times to come for other late-capitalist societies.



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