

“I hope to retire in some Japanese village”

An interview with two Austrian researchers on their documentary

「日本の村で老後を過ごせたら」ードキュメンタリーに関するオーストリア研究者らへのインタビュー

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1. Introduction

In many countries worldwide, especially in remote (mountainous), rural areas, population ageing and population decline are serious issues. Japan has the highest ageing rate worldwide, with 26.6% of the population currently aged 65 years or older (statistical data 2015).

During 2013-2014 an Austrian research team conducted qualitative fieldwork in three Japanese rural municipalities, each with a high proportion of the population older than 65 years of age: Kosuge (40.8%, statistical data 2015) in Yamanashi prefecture, Kitaaiiki (39.9%, statistical data 2015) and Minamiaiki (41.5%, statistical data 2015) in Nagano. Their purpose was to study the active ageing of older people in these three research sites. Within the framework of their scientific research, a scientific documentary film was produced. This documentary deals with the daily life and challenges faced by older people while focusing on 84-year-old former farmer's wife Shimako (see photo 9), who has a great passion for gateball, and 93-year-old Gen'ichi, the oldest man with a driving license in his village.

In 2016, the researchers uploaded the documentary to YouTube. Since then, the documentary has accumulated over 1.7 million views and nearly 1,000 comments (as of late October 2020). For this special issue, we, the editors, Naomi Shimpo and Christoph Rupprecht, thought it would be interesting to examine what foreigners find so fascinating about rural Japanese life and how they perceive it. For that purpose we interviewed the two researchers, Pia Kieninger and Isabelle Prochaska-Meyer.



Photo 1: Village scenery in Kitaaiiki, 2014.

2. How it all began

—How did you become interested in rural Japan? Why did you start the project of the documentary “65+ Being old in rural Japan”, or “Active Aging”?

Prochaska-Meyer: Being half-Japanese myself – my mother is Japanese – I have had a close relation to Japanese culture since childhood. Through my research (Japanese Studies) I became interested in topics and geographical areas that I was not so familiar with. Rather than investigating the “mainstream culture”, I was more attracted by aspects of what is rather called the “periphery”. So for example, for my master and doctoral thesis, I conducted fieldwork in Okinawa on religious rituals and spiritual healers.

What I like about doing research (and especially, fieldwork) is that I gain access to people and settings that I would not have known without the academic context. I have always lived in the city, so it is thanks to my fieldwork that I could experience and gain glimpses of everyday life in the countryside and to talk with older adults about their biography and their present situation.

For our research project related to the documentary film, we wanted to do fieldwork in rural Japan and were thinking of a suitable topic. Thinking of Japanese society, one known fact is that the ageing rate is very high, and this situation

The full documentary is accessible from the following URL:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDyPwiVObzg>

is especially severe in the countryside. While planning the concept of our research proposal in 2012, we came upon the keyword “active ageing” – that year had been declared as the “European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations”. We liked the concept of active ageing and incorporated it into our research focus.

Kieninger: Cultural landscape has always played an important role in my life. I grew up in a rural village on the foothills of the Alps in Germany, my grandparents were dairy farmers. In Vienna (Austria) I studied landscape planning. A MEXT scholarship for my PhD brought me finally 2004-2006 to the University of Tokyo and I did field research on cultural landscape preservation, mainly in Ohyamassenmaida (Bōsō-Peninsula). That was my first personal contact with rural Japan. I still remember it like it was yesterday: the difficulties to arrive there by public transportation. I had to walk the last stretch of way up the hill, heavily laden, the trolley suitcase full with food for one week. Everything there was new to me: the fascinating blue house roofs, shrines and temples harmonically embedded in the landscape, impermeable forests, a different vegetation, the enchanting singing of the *uguisu* (Japanese bush warbler), the ear splitting ribbiting of the frogs out of their “terrace-pools”, the rustling of the bamboo in the wind, the scent of the country air, etc. However, what moved me the most was the demographic population share in the countryside: *koreisha* everywhere. Elders, with deep bent postures, doing hard work in the fields. Abandoned houses. Where were the youths?

The landscape beauty and the heartwarming and friendly manner of the people of Ohyamassenmaida and the other rural sites in Japan I visited in those two years, not only gave me an unforgettable time but also made me fall deeply in love with rural Japan, leading to the to continue rural Japan research in the future.

Since three years I am living now in a village on the foot of the French Jura mountains on the border to Switzerland, before that, in a little village in the Austrian Unesco World heritage site Wachau. The idea of including also a documentary in our scientific research had several reasons. There was on the one hand our interest in the “moving picture”. I have a long-time passion for photography. In 2010 my colleague and I participated in an ethnographic documentary workshop and thereafter I graduated a 3 semester training for film documentary at the BOKU University. With photos and film you can convey different messages, or at least in a different way. And most of all, you can reach a different

audience. A scientific paper (in English) will hardly leave the scientific community. A documentary, yes. I also wanted to give “something back” to our informants, to our three study sites. The camera was also an interesting approaching tool – for participatory observation and in the interviews. Of course, a film camera can change the “climate”, people might be reserved, feeling embarrassed appearing in a documentary and not telling everything. That’s why we used it very cautiously in the first year and mainly in the second, when we were already in good contact with the people. Anyhow, my impression was the opposite. The people seemed to be happy – most of them wanted to be in the documentary. And I do not have the impression that they were changing themselves. In the study site Kitaaiiki a funny story happened. At the beginning, the municipality made a short movie about us for their local TV channel. We had to introduce ourselves and tell about our research and documentary. You saw the loudspeakers in the first setting of our documentary? Inhabitants were also informed exactly by these ones about us. From that day on, everyone knew us. That was very helpful.

Prochaska-Meyer: I totally agree with Pia concerning the easy accessibility to a topic through a documentary film. You can reach a much broader audience. And as the saying goes: a picture tells more than a thousand words. For example, gateball is a very popular activity among older adults in our study sites. In Austria, gateball is not known, so instead of explaining the game through words and describing how participants are concentrating on the game (which is not only physically stimulating, but also cognitively and socially), it is easier and faster to show the scenes of retired farmers engaged in a gateball tournament.



Photo 2: Prochaska-Meyer (left) and Kieninger (right) with seniors during their break in the gateball hall (Kitaaiiki, October 2013).

3. Comparing Austrian and Japanese rural villages

—How did you find the villages in Nagano and Yamanashi after arriving there? What is common and different between Japanese and Austrian (or German) villages?

Prochaska-Meyer: Before visiting our research sites, we tried to get to know the municipalities as much as possible. So we visited the municipalities' websites to get familiar with the local characteristics. Of great help in the preparation phase was also Google Streetview, where we would take "virtual walks" through the villages in Nagano and Yamanashi. But these experiences of course cannot replace the feeling of really being there. I remember when we approached the village in Yamanashi by car for the first time, it was a rainy day. The closer we got, the mistier it became and I had the impression that this village was very remote – although technically speaking it was the closest to Tokyo among our three research sites. At some spots inside the village there was no telephone signal, so this strengthened my impression that we were really in a remote area. But the positive sides of the rural region dominate, such as the fresh air and the abundance of green and nature, the sound of birds and the wind instead of busy traffic and cars. I am always impressed and positively impacted by nature, by the beautiful scenery in the countryside: persimmons hanging on leafless trees in winter, or little white flowers of buckwheat blooming in summer. And of course, another positive and charming side of our research sites was the warm hospitality of people we met there. I have to confess that I am not at all familiar with rural Austria. As a Japanologist, I am more focused on social issues in Japan. But it is through and thanks to my research that I became more interested in and aware of the Austrian countryside. Here, as it is with many rural regions, municipalities suffer from depopulation and in many communities, the infrastructure weakens due to the lack of people.

However, one big difference between villages in Japan and Europe/Austria is that in Austria, I would see hens and other small farm animals kept for private consumption. In the countryside in Austria, it is not unusual to see a hen house or to hear the rooster crowing in the morning. In Japan I do not recall seeing a single hen or any other farm animal in the countryside. And, with this in mind, I am always surprised by how cheaply eggs are sold in Japan – due to egg production in battery cages (in the European Union, battery cages are banned). This might be

one big difference for me when thinking about the rural area: the absence of free range farm animals in Japan (or in the places I visited).



Photo 3: Main village road in Kosuge, 2017. On the right side in the back you can see the village loudspeakers on a pole and in the front a red vending machine with Coca-Cola advertising..



Photo 4: Small grocery shop in Kitaaiki, 2013. The limited assortment of goods ranges from daily food over clothes, agricultural tools, seeds, alcohol, etc.

Kieninger: Same as for my colleague, the strongest impression left our first arrival in Kosuge. It was already dark when we drove up the Japan National Route 411 in November from Kōshū around Mount Keikan, passing Chichibu-Tama-Kai National Park. The street did not stop to climb into the sky, the feeling in my chest became more and more oppressive. Thick snow started when we reached the highest point of the mountain pass. No houses, no civilisation. We alone in nowhere. The street to Kosuge descended through a conifer plantation, appearing ghostlike. When we arrived the village, I had the feeling of arriving in Siberia. The municipality was busy with the move to another building. We met the mayor in the half-empty city hall, freezing between the

moving boxes. In that moment, I regretted our decision for that place.

All three study sites are comparatively narrow, remote and tranquil mountain valleys (see photos 1, 3, 5, 8). Kosuge was the site with the highest share of elders (45% at the time of the research). The advantage of the sites in Nagano is their closer vicinity to a city with all important facilities (hospital, bigger supermarkets instead of the little village grocery shops (see photo 4), pharmacies...), in contrast to Kosuge, from where it takes an eternity to climb down the small winding mountain roads. During our stay we heard about the plans of a tunnel, connecting Kosuge better and faster with Uenohara. If that project is already conducted, it might have a positive impact on the population trend of Kosuge. The two villages in Nagano we visited for the first time in early October. The sun was shining, Cosmos lining the roadsides. My biggest surprise there have been the numerous and big gateball halls (a type of sport unknown for me until that time) populated with active and enthusiastic seniors (see photo 2).

When one is not or less familiar with rural Japan, everything looks so exotic and different – at least that was my personal experience: the post is red (not yellow as in Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland...), *jidohanbaiki* (vending machines) even in the remotest corner in the middle of nowhere, each agricultural tool has a different shape, etc.

But with a closer look, I could find a common ground to other European countries I am familiar with. Austria e.g., same as Japan, is a rich industrial nation with a high share of mountains. Rural ageing, population loss and the negative impact on cultural landscape is also problematic there in the remote areas – even if not to such an extent as in Japan I think. In Germany, especially the east is affected by abandonment. Furthermore, rural France where the super-centralistic focus on Paris creates a pulling effect. In Switzerland, significant differences on the real-estate prices exist between urban or good accessible sites and the remote mountainous areas (e.g. canton Jura). There the tax rate instead is many times higher. A high tax rate in/for the poor (remote) municipalities, while the good accessible sites attract rich people and business with very low taxes. Or in the Italian alpine regions like Trentino, Veneto and Lombardy – I feel sad to see so many empty houses there, vacant but difficult to sell. Only five permanent inhabitants are left in the mountain village of my husband's uncle: *genkaishuraku* (marginal villages, in danger of disappearing due to depopulation) also there.

Numerous measurements to support the weak

infrastructure and/or elderlies in rural Japan correspond also to that one's e.g. in Austria or Germany – however maybe not as consistent. Mobile supermarkets, as you saw one in our documentary, are popular in Germany as well. Some structurally weak municipalities there have even a mobile medical practice, the so-called "medibus", in order to ensure health care provision. As in Japan, for German and Austrian physicians it is much more lucrative of having a medical practice in big cities, as their income depends on the number of patients. This leads to a lack of doctors in structural weak areas. In Kitaaiki and also Kosuge (if I am right), the municipality therefore employed the doctor. I know this "system" also from Germany.



Photo 5: Autumn scenery in Kosuge, 2013.

In Kitaaiki, the medical practice provided a "washitsu-corner" (a traditional Japanese-style room with tatami mats out of rice- and soft rush straw), with board and parlour games and books to read for elderlies. I loved it, but I have never seen it before in "my" European countries, even though I remember that in my German home village, the medical practice was popular among elderlies (especially women) to meet each other (in pre-Corona-times).

Daycare (centres) for elderly dependents – of course with variations in organisation and structure – exist also in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, etc. This is also the case for seniors associations, meetings and activities for seniors, organised by the municipality. In Italy, Germany, Austria the church is also active therein or rather is an important issue for elderlies and a possibility to meet each other regularly at least once a week for the divine service.

One of the most relevant difference personally for me is the housing situation in (rural) Japan, that has left me somehow with an impression of poverty. I never before saw washing machines and kitchen sinks outside the houses. I have a friend, living in a farmhouse in Bōsō peninsula, without

bathroom, acquaintances in Shimane in an old house without glass-windows. When it becomes cold, they have to close the rain-window *amado*. In Kosuge, I met one senior living in a house with a bare soil flooring in the entrance, in Kitaaiki I saw a house with an open toilet outside in the garden. That is charming for a short while, but I imagine it tiring for a permanent stay. The construction of the houses in (rural) Japan also partly looks very light and not so stable, thin tin roofs. Once I stayed in a *minshuku* (bed and breakfast) constructed on some meters high pillars, deep down the river, on the other side of the street steeply upward a conifer afforestation. I remember my awe regarding an announced typhoon, which luckily did not pass by. A landslide from the afforestation would have washed us all down the river. The nowadays absence of central heating and poor thermal insulation of the houses (at least) in the colder regions, in a rich high-tech country as Japan, is incomprehensible for me. Particularly as the resource wood is growing all around. Forest is capital. In Germany and Austria the biomass business led to a strong forest management. In Kosuge, I only met two persons, heating with little wood-stoves. One of them however, had a bit hole in the external wall for the stovepipe. So the heating effect was minimal. In Echigo Tsumari, the houses have several entrance gates, in order to stop the cold air from coming inside. Sitting with thick down jackets under the *kotatsu* – with a bright red head and a frozen back and maybe the smell of an additional kerosene heater in the noise. From the physician in Kitaaiki I learned that the high temperature difference from “under the *kotatsu*” and the remaining cold house, in combination with too salty food (as in the pickles e.g.), have led to a high stroke rate in Nagano-Ken. That’s why the municipality in Kitaaiki also offered salt reduced cooking lessons for elderlies.



Photo 6: Main village road in Kitaaiki, 2014. On the right side you can see the foil greenhouses, where the locals grow their own vegetables/fruits.

In our three study sites, nearly everyone, even in high age, seemed to be active in agriculture or at least growing their own vegetable (see photos 5, 6). I never observed such a strong “trend” in my “European rural area environment”. This however is a very subjective impression, as we did not have any statistical data on private orchard management.

Pretty good is the wifi internet connection in rural Japan. That point however is rather relevant for the younger than the current old generation I think. Pretty good is the wifi internet connection in rural Japan. That point however is rather relevant for the younger than the current old generation I think.

Several of our viewers admired the driving skills of our two main protagonists Shimako-san and Genichi-san. In order to get the driving licence, they have to take a test regularly. The driving licence handling of elders varies a lot between the European countries. In Germany, France and Austria e.g. you have a lifelong driving licence, even if the discussion to introduce a driver fitness test flares up time and again. In Switzerland, seniors have to do a test every two years, from 75 on. Also in Italy a test is obligatory with a certain age.

Very amusing for me was the impression that all elders in rural Japan seem to drive the same car – a white Daihatsu HIJET truck. Also our two protagonists. Have you noticed? Such an impression of homogeneity in cars I only had once when I did scientific fieldwork in the White Mountains of Crete island, where all shepherds seemed to possess big Japanese pick-ups.

Surprising and unfamiliar for me was also the direct manner of the Japanese rural people. Very private questions, even at the first get to know each other: “do you have a boyfriend?”, “when will you marry?”, “do you have kids?”, etc. From one villager in our study sites I was even asked how I can kiss someone, with such a long and big nose and in another place, senior ladies wanted to touch my blond hairs – as I was their first foreigner with blond hairs.

The last difference to rural Europe I want to mention here, is the super presence of vending machines *jidohanbaiki* (mainly for drinks as water or Coca-Cola) in Japan, even out in the sticks (see photo 3). In Austria or France I know vending machines/fridges only very sporadic, mainly for local products, e.g. wine in Klosterneuburg (Austria), goat-milk products in the Nature Parc Sölktäler (Austria), cheese in the French Jura mountains, pizza.

4. Youtube for documentaries?

—*Why did you decide to release the documentary on YouTube?*

Kieninger: We participated in several documentary film festivals first. After that, I thought YouTube might be a good platform to make our documentary more known. Especially also, as the OeAD (Austrian Academic Exchange Service) already uploaded it on its website. The OeAD told us that our documentary is an excellent flagship for them. That was encouraging, that our film is also of interest outside Japan.

Prochaska-Meyer: Youtube is a widespread and user-friendly video platform, so the movie is basically accessible to a worldwide audience. I also hear from Japanese studies colleagues at various universities that they have shown the movie in their classes or forwarded the link to students to watch for homework. I think the 35-minute format is also an optimal length to portray a topic in a more detailed way – not too short, not too long.

5. Worldwide reception

—*What kind of comments on the documentary did you get? How did the audience perceive rural Japan?*

Kieninger: Since we uploaded the documentary (17.06.2016), our audience with 1.706.778 viewing (by 29.10.2020) is primarily male (68%), strongest in the age groups 55-64 years (22.3%) and 65+ (19.4%). Persons between 18-24 years are least interested (2.9%). Most spread is our documentary in the USA with 23.7% (mainly among the 65+; 30%) and in India with 10.8%, there however are the most viewers between 25-34 years (32.4%). Japan ranges only on the 7th rank (3.7%). The most viewers belong there to the age class 65+ (30.1%). Austria ranges even only on the 49th rank, with 0.1%. These data however are only temporary, as the viewings are increasing fast – e.g. more as 1,000 from 28.10.-29.10.2020.

The comments (941 confirmed comments*, by 29.10.2020) can be divided roughly into three different groups:

1) The audience loves the documentary and expresses its appreciation, e.g. “A very informative documentary on active ageing and the importance of community sharing”, “Very good documentary! Old folks should live like this not in care homes where they become weaker each day”, “This is one of the best documentaries

I've ever watched. I'm sharing it with my Facebook friends...”, “Interesting documentary, well researched and produced. Similar issues affect rural, isolated communities with increasingly older population in countries with high life expectancy such as Italy, Spain, Switzerland etc.”, “Awesome documentary! They're all so cute, strong and self-sufficient. The community seems so peaceful.”, “Definitely active ageing at its best”.



Photo 7: Kieninger (left) and Prochaska-Meyer (right) with main informants after filming them working at their orchard (Kosuge, 2014).

2) The viewers wish also for their own age such an active life, good health condition; they compare the situation of the elderlies with their own country: “Inspiring to see this. I try to live an active life”, “This video was on my recommended list. Is YouTube telling me I am old lol. I live in rural USA, in a farming community and here to it seems all the elders are in great health too, must be the fresh air and all the different activities the elderly have. But here it is all ages and we look after our elders, they don't have to want or need for anything. They pay us in knowledge and that is priceless. I enjoy looking after them. They just want to keep their independence and since many do not have any living relatives, the community supports them. I wish all the elderly could experience that.”, “This is so wonderful. It fills my heart with joy. I wish to live in a place like that when I grow old.”, “Instead of a very long life, it's good to have an active and happy life as long as you live. Old age care homes are like going to hell. This Japanese style 'being old in rural Japan' is exemplary. I love Japan.”, “Thank you for sharing, its gives me great joy to see them happy doing all by themselves. It's beautiful I wish to retire in one of these places....”, “Excellent video. We all should learn from these lovely elders how to age gracefully while remaining active.♥”, “I prefer this over the nursing home. More peaceful way!”, “I'm dying of love. I have this huge

appreciation for elderly anyway but there is something spiritual and special about the elderly in Japan that warms my heart. I wish I'm that healthy and happy in their age".

3) The viewers want to move to rural Japan: "So lush and beautiful. One day I hope to retire in some Japanese village and just enjoy nature.", "Amazing documentary! After watching it I felt a strong urge to go there and help them as much as I can.", "I'm from the USA I would love to live there and work the fields.", "It looks like a good place for an Ex-pat. Would you recommend Japan and how is the cost of living...", "It makes me want to move over there!"

But we also got comments that the viewers felt sad while watching our documentary. "It's so sad to be observing the end of a lifestyle", "This was the most bitter sweetest documentary I've ever watched... (: Very beautiful!", "Gives me joy and sorrow at the same time." or that they could not survive there: "I would die of boredom! City girl!"

The village loudspeakers and/or the music out of it have been also a vivid topic too (see photo 3). Some of the viewers love it, while others cannot stand it and/or feel reminded on communist countries. The last was my first association too at the beginning. But I appreciate the music – which seems similar to me to the European church/city hall bells, ringing for certain hours. And of course the loudspeakers in Japan have the very important function to inform the inhabitants about dangerous situations, e.g. a tsunami. In Minamiaiki we witnessed the loudspeaker announcement about a monkey, passing the village: "Please keep your doors and windows closed".

"Wait wait wait.... the villages actually have theme music??? Cool!", "It's cool, yes, but I'm not sure I'd like the village music to pop on in the early morning, just when I'm listening to the sounds of nature.", "Like eastern Europe in the 70s/ 80s...", "Sounds like a village on RPGs you play. Lol", "Loud! And you can't turn it off and you can't have peace and quiet. Same in India. There is no law protecting silence and public nuisance music. You would not like it, it comes over loud speakers and is deafening. China too! North Korea also.", "I mean, how long are those sounds they use? Its annoying well yes, but it could also give the elderly a rhythm to their life. Like after the morning sound I will meet my friends etc. It has advantages and it is not that annoying like the propaganda in the 70s in eastern Europe (or China)", "How can we turn you off?"

Several viewers loved our background music and wanted to know where they could acquire it. The songs are played and sung by one of our

informants – Okabe Chika – a restaurant owner and cook in Kosuge. When we went to eat for dinner in his restaurant – sometimes as the only guests – he often made music for us. Also the vending machines *jidohanbaiki* have been commented vividly by the viewers and evaluated differently (positive – negative opinions).

In general, most of the viewers have a very positive impression of Japan. They perceive rural Japan as a peaceful, clean, quiet and calm place, with fresh air and healthy food. They picture rural Japanese as fortunate because of their health and strength into very old age. According to that, so the consensus view, rural Japan must be a good/the best place for becoming old. I share this opinion, however with a "but". In our research we studied on "Active Ageing", i.e., our focus has been the active elders, not the care depended. But of course, also rural Japan has them. The municipalities have day-care centres, where the working population can bring their invalid relatives. These are fed, clothed and bathed there. But that aspect did not enter our documentary – we should have mentioned it more prominently, I guess. Some critical comments addressed that however and questioned also e.g. how life might be there in winter season and why we didn't show that aspect. We conducted our research just for that reason not in winter, because how do you approach/meet elderlies, when all are sitting at home under the table heater *kotatsu*? Anyhow, cold snowy winter without central heating in the houses is no fun – some elders (have to) leave to stay with their kids in the cities. So, our audience's view on rural Japan is partly a bit too idealised I think.



Photo 8: Fields for commercial farming in Minamiaiki (2014). In Minamiaiki and Kitaaiki, agriculture is dominated by so-called highland vegetables, like cabbage, lettuce, etc., mainly cultivated with plastic sheets.

Prochaska-Meyer: When showing the movie at academic conferences, the response was always very positive. A comment which was often given was that we developed a very close relationship to our main protagonists, Gen'ichi-san and Shimako-

san. And that the lives of older people were depicted in an optimistic way. I also realized that non-Japanese viewers tended to be fond of the rural life as portrayed in the movie, whereas I also received remarks by Japanese viewers that it was sad to see older adults living alone in the countryside, since they were worried about the future, ten or twenty years ahead.

A documentary movie is always a “selected view”. Of course, we wanted to portray the life of elderly in the study sites as authentically as possible, but as Pia said, we showed just a fraction of it, especially focusing on our two protagonists and the topic of active ageing. Also, our idea was that the audience should enjoy watching the film, that’s why included background music. During the post-production phase of our film, we received many helpful suggestions and advice from our film editor Stefan Nutz, who is an experienced documentary filmmaker. He also contributed greatly to the structure and “flow” of the movie.

6. Reflections on a worldwide release

—*What kind of potential does it have to make such a documentary on Japanese landscapes in non-native languages and release all over the world?*

Kieninger: Our documentary on active ageing might inspire the audience to reflect on their own retirement or give an impulse to meditate about that issue, which will pop up in the future. In that way the documentary can help to create sensitivity and awareness of this everybody concerning topic. With the positive examples of our film, it hopefully can support countries/institutions to find the right ways/solutions for their own areas: *“Great job! More documentaries like this to educate the next generation. I thank you for giving importance to the elderly. Most people forget them”, I 😊 this documentary. I 😊 the culture and tradition of Japan. This video will be of great help for the elderly in the Philippines. I don't know why scientists spend millions of dollars and millions of man hours researching longevity, they could just come to YouTube comments, everyone in the comments has apparently cracked the code”, “Beautiful wish I could speak the language. Being a senior, I long for an area here similar to this. You are so fortunate. Know that you guys are in hog heaven. ☺ Wish I could join you. Stay well🙏”.*

Many countries worldwide look to Japan. Japan is known for long life, high-tech, healthy food. Young people adore it due to the manga scene. The view of Japan thereby is predominantly shaped by the images of urban Japan I guess. In

that way our documentary can help to show a more unknown part of Japan (unknown maybe also for some Japanese townspeople) and to make it popular – *“This place looks like an anime scene transformed to reality. So serene & beautiful”*. I wish that as a positive consequence of it, youngsters become interested in living in the countryside and will bring a turnaround of the current negative rural population trend.



Photo 9: Prochaska-Meyer (left) and Kieninger (right) with Shimako-san (middle), one of the documentary's protagonists.

Prochaska-Meyer: I agree with Pia’s statement that our documentary can introduce another facet of Japan, aside from high-tech megacities or the traditional tourist destinations. And definitely it can stimulate discussions and reflections, either within a certain group or in the comments’ section on youtube. I found it amusing that some commentators would remark that rural Japan in our documentary looks like an anime scene. I think this shows the strong impact of “soft power” that Japanese popular culture has among (especially) young people. Would these people have watched the documentary or been interested at all in rural Japan if they hadn’t known a certain anime set in the Japanese countryside? I find the recent phenomenon of “anime pilgrimage” very interesting, that unknown rural places become popular through a specific anime series, or that even a matsuri is created imitating the festival depicted in the anime (as in the case of the “Bonbori Matsuri” inspired by the anime series “*Hanasaku iroha*”). An Austrian student of mine who enthusiastically learned Japanese in his free time dreamed of travelling to a certain Japanese village - the reason was that this place was the location of his favourite anime. And he would later visit this place several times and become befriended with locals. This shows how influential popular culture can be, and that many young foreign people perceive Japanese *inaka* as

something “cool”. I think that’s a very positive impact. But of course one should await long-term effects and observe how far these trends show real changes in the sense of revitalisation.

Kieninger: Some of the foreign viewers desire to move to Japan (in their retirement). I can comprehend that. I also have that dream from time to time. However I am doubtful if it would be a wise decision. Rural communities in general are strong because of their family links and decade-long friendships. It is not easy to enter those close communities as an old single foreigner/foreigner couple, maybe already with some weaknesses and without the language knowledge. This is the case for all countries. I am moreover sceptical, if used to a certain lifestyle for decades, in how far it is easy to change it and/or to adapt to new climatic conditions? Hot-sultriness summers, cold-humid winters, the wet rainy season and strong typhoons in autumn as in Japan. Maybe better to find the own way in the own country, bearing in mind the best practice examples of the active and gentle smiling elders of rural Japan.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all the kind people we met in rural Japan, especially in Kitaaiiki, Minamiaiki, Kosuge, Ohyamasenmida and Echigo-Tsumari.



Photo 10: Tranquil village road (Kitaaiiki, 2013).