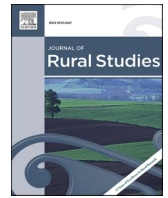


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Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

The gap between administration and migrants: Terminologies and experiences of urban-rural migration in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the discourse on urban-rural migration within contemporary Japan's administrative landscape, its representation in academic literature, along with local governments' support measures for urban-rural migrants and their experiences. I seek to unveil the consequences of imprecise definitions and ambiguous classifications of urban-rural migration, which can foster misunderstandings of the phenomenon, influencing both individual self-representation and support schemes. Drawing on ethnographic data collected over two years both online and onsite in two municipalities in northern Kyūshū, this article shows how the UIJ-turn classification and the *ijū/teijū* (migration/settlement) distinction are employed in Japanese political-administrative discourse and how this affects migrants' experiences. I investigate how administration and migrants conceptualize urban-rural migration differently. The discussion reveals a disconnect between the administrative narrative, which heavily relies on rigid classification terminology, and migrants' actual experiences, emphasizing the implications for support schemes, migrants' self-perception, and their integration into rural communities. This underscores the necessity to acknowledge changes in the rural population for a more comprehensive understanding of the future of rural communities in the Global North.

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, educated individuals have moved away from the metropolis in various countries (Fielding, 1982). Studies on urban-rural migration in the Western Hemisphere have focused on Europe, North America, and Australia (Dahms, 1995; Stockdale et al., 2000; Curry et al., 2001). The literature on contemporary urban-rural migration across the Global North reveals a remarkable heterogeneity in migration patterns and migrants' profiles (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016; Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Gosnell and Abrams, 2011). Urban-rural migration in Japan mirrors this complexity with various mobility patterns, including return migration from abroad, multiple relocations within the country, and shifts between rural and urban areas (Dilley et al., 2022; Kakinuma and Abel, 2022; Klien, 2020b; Rosenberger, 2017; Takahashi et al., 2021; Takeda, 2020).

In Anglophone academic discourse, this diversity is reflected by several terms employed to describe urban-rural migration. "Counterurbanization" is the most employed term in rural studies (Boyle and Halfacree, 1998; Champion, 1992; Fielding, 1982; Halfacree, 2001; Mitchell, 2004). It encapsulates demographic shifts characterized by population deconcentration and migration towards less densely populated areas. Another term is "back-to-the-land movement," which refers to individuals relocating to rural areas with the intention of living "off the land" (Halfacree, 2006, p. 309), often accompanied by small-scale

farming and countercultural practices (Halfacree, 2007; Jacob, 2010; Meijering et al., 2007). "Lifestyle migration" describes the movement of people "within the developed world searching for a better way of life" (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, p. 608), focusing on motivations and considering migration as a process rather than a one-time event (Benson and O'Reilly, 2016; Hoey, 2014). Additionally, "amenity migration" captures the phenomenon of people moving based on the draw of natural or cultural attractions (Gosnell and Abrams, 2011), while "exurbanization" denotes a form of "urban-connected country living" (Taylor, 2011, p. 323). This body of literature also highlights challenges in classifying and defining migrants versus locals by stressing diverse ways of belonging to rural areas and the complexities of identity formation in post-urban migration, challenging traditional notions of what it means to be a 'local' (Gielsing et al., 2017).

Over the past three decades, contemporary urban-rural migration in Japan has become a focal point in public discourse, institutional arenas, and academic research (Klien, 2020). While researchers writing about urban-rural migration in Japan for an international audience use some of the terms mentioned above (Dilley et al., 2022; Klien, 2020) and the term *den'en kaiki* translates to "back to the land" in Japanese (Odagiri and Tsutsui, 2016), central and local administrative bodies, media outlets, and researchers have adopted different terms to represent urban-rural migration in Japan. Among the most used, the UIJ-turn terminology classifies the movement according to the migrants' place

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2024.103500>

Received 14 March 2024; Received in revised form 1 October 2024; Accepted 20 November 2024

Available online 25 November 2024

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of origin, while the *iju/teiju* dichotomy distinguishes between migration and settlement. Japan is an interesting case study for several reasons. First, the country grapples with significant challenges such as rural depopulation and an aging population, evident in the proliferation of abandoned houses, desolate streets, vacant supermarkets, and decaying infrastructures (Klien, 2023; Reiher, 2014). Second, Japanese public authorities have made substantial efforts to revitalize rural areas by offering various support schemes and economic incentives to attract people to these regions (Klien, 2020; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Reiher, 2020). Lastly, Japan's long-standing history of urban-rural migration provides valuable insights into the dynamics of counter-urbanization and the complex interplay between internal migration patterns and governmental interventions (Muramatsu, 2017).

Given the resonance of rural Japan's challenges with those faced by other industrialized countries (Dahms, 1995; Halfacree, 2006; Hugo and Smailes, 1985; Perpiña Castillo et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2001), this study contributes to the discourse on internal migration to rural areas by exploring the impact of the terminology used for urban-rural migration in policy schemes to support migrants. Based on ethnographic data collected in two municipalities in northern Kyūshū, Buzen in Fukuoka Prefecture and Hasami in Nagasaki Prefecture, this study examines the prevailing terminology used to characterize urban-rural migration in Japan and addresses the question of how the discourse on urban-rural migration is translated into policies and affects urban-rural migrants' experiences. I argue that migrants' life paths are far from linear and involve a web of relationships; thus, the terms currently used oversimplify migration trajectories and the relational value of migrants' journeys. Because this oversimplified classification informs support schemes that follow a rigid approach when it comes to eligibility for funding, the language used to classify migration trajectories and define people moving from an urban to a rural context has the power to influence the migration experience.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section, I will present the history and trends in urban-rural migration in Japan and the terms used today. After presenting the methodology of my research in Part 3, I will discuss the support system and the related language at the municipal and prefectural level in Part 4. In Part 5, based on ethnographic data, I will show how the terminology currently used in Japan to describe the phenomenon of urban-rural migration, while failing to capture important elements of the phenomenon on the field, affects both migrants' journeys and self-perception.

2. Classifying urban-rural migration in Japan in academic debates

Since the end of the Second World War, Japan's rural areas have undergone significant structural changes, primarily due to increasing urbanization, which has pushed new generations out of villages and led to "regional shrinkage" (Matanle and Rausch, 2011). Initially, only remote areas were affected, but by the beginning of the 21st century, negative population trends began to affect rural areas near Japan's urban centers as well (Matanle and Rausch, 2011; Traphagan and Knight, 2003). Rural exodus has several effects, including low birth rates, an aging population, and the out-migration of younger generations, leading to economic stagnation, abandoned buildings, fallow fields, and a decline in social and human capital, all of which affect the quality of life (Knight, 2003b; Mock, 2006; Thompson, 2003). This trend touches all of Japan, with regional variations based on factors such as population distribution, topography, and proximity to urban centers (Bailey, 1991; Lützel, 1995; Matanle and Sato, 2010; Traphagan and Knight, 2003). The consequence is a situation marked by uncertainty and the looming prospect of rural collapse, exacerbated by long-standing economic crises (Matanle and Rausch, 2011; Mock, 2006; Thompson, 2003).

The Japanese government has actively sought to revitalize peripheral areas facing significant demographic decline by implementing

strategies to boost the population since the early 1970s (Knight, 2003b; Matanle and Rausch, 2011; Palmer, 1988). Initially, interventions aimed at counteracting population decline included economic support for prenatal and post-natal care, marriage brokerage initiatives incentivizing return migration, persuading the younger generation to stay through infrastructure and service upgrades, and creating specialized welfare services to attract the elderly (Knight, 2003b; Matanle, 2007; Traphagan and Knight, 2003). Additionally, the nostalgic appeal of ancestral rural communities, encapsulated in the concept of *urusato*, was leveraged to attract new waves of tourists and create job opportunities (Creighton, 1997; Hasan, 2017; Knight, 1994; Reiher, 2010). Following the burst of the bubble economy, both central and local governments made joint efforts to facilitate newcomers' relocation to the countryside from the 2000s (Takahashi et al., 2021) through economic support and assistance with bureaucratic procedures (Obikwelu et al., 2017; Reiher, 2020). One notable example is the *chiiki okoshi kyoryokutai* (COKT, English: Community Building Support Staff) program, established in 2009, aiming to encourage young people to relocate to rural areas and participate in local life by providing a three-year work contract (Zollet and Qu, 2024; Klein, 2022; Odagiri et al., 2015; Reiher, 2020).

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, "return migration" of young urbanites to the countryside was observed by geographers (Wiltshire, 1979) and indicated a countermovement to the conventional migration pattern, where individuals typically moved from rural areas to urban centers (Esaki et al., 1999; Kuroda, 1969; Okada, 1971, 1976). Severe depopulation prompted local and central governments to consider 'return migration' as a potential solution for the future of rural communities. Japan's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism (MLIT) and the Cabinet Office have reported a growing interest among individuals in relocating to rural areas or adopting dual residence from 2010 and particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cabinet Office, 2022; MLIT, 2023).

Social scientists have delved into individual relocation experiences, revealing links to Japan's contemporary labor market as a source of social and economic insecurity (Klien, 2019, 2020; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Reiher, 2020; Takahashi et al., 2021). Young urban migrants, driven by a desire for a sustainable lifestyle and greater relaxation, turn to activities such as organic farming to sustain rural living (Knight, 2003a; Kurochkina, 2022; Rosenberger, 2017). Many urbanites migrate to rural areas to provide a safe environment for raising children, seeking a lifestyle that blends ecological awareness with personal fulfillment (Hoda and Kubo, 2019; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Sekiya, 2018; Takahashi et al., 2021). Moreover, scholars highlight how the flexibility shown by these young migrants mirrors that of the contemporary urban generation, utilizing strategies honed in an increasingly precarious job market (Allison, 2014; Arai, 2016; Klein, 2020). This juxtaposition of urban flexibility with the perceived immobility of rural communities is critical in analyzing contemporary rural Japan (Klien, 2020), where the experiences of urban migrants, blending urban cosmopolitanism with an attachment to the local territory of rural communities, underscore tensions between local traditions and the globalizing influences shaping the new countryside.

3. Terminologies

In Japan, various terms are used to delineate urban migrants' trajectories and status. For example, the term *den'en kaiki* (return to the countryside) refers to internal migration towards rural areas. Sometimes translated also as "Return to Rural Living" (Odagiri et al., 2015), the term refers to the phenomenon of internal migration from big cities towards small villages motivated by a lifestyle change that as such has an impact on the socio-economic structure and landscape of rural areas (Ibid.). Another terminology is the UIJ-turn classification, which categorizes migrants based on their place of origin: U-turn indicates urban residents returning to their rural hometowns; I-turn signifies a

unidirectional move from city to countryside; and J-turn describes individuals moving from hometowns to cities for education or employment and later settling in rural areas, often near their original homes. Since its introduction in the late 1960s (Wiltshire, 1979), this classification has become deeply entrenched in both media and institutional discourse. Today, the UIJ-turn terminology not only continues to enjoy widespread usage but has also led to the emergence of additional "-turns," differentiated by destination and motivation.

The origin of the "-turn" terminology is related to the debates surrounding the definition of urban-rural migration that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, spurred by data collected by the Population Research Institute of the Ministry of Health and Welfare (Esaki et al., 1999). Kuroda Toshio initiated the discussion on the return of the population to rural areas at the 1960 Congress of the Japan Sociological Society, coining the term U-turn to depict a new wave of migration involving individuals leaving metropolitan regions to return to their hometowns (Okada, 1971; Wiltshire, 1979). Immediately adopted, the term "U-turn" encompassed various forms of urban-to-rural migration, serving as a synonym for return migration. It simply denoted the reverse movement from urban centers back to rural areas, referred to as "population U-turn" or *jinkō u-tan* (Hisaeda, 1972; Lee and Sugiura, 2018; Okada, 1976). For this reason, the use of term was widely criticized since the beginning for a lack of precision in describing migrants' trajectories, in particular for its overlap with J-turn (Esaki et al., 1999; Lee and Sugiura, 2018; Wiltshire, 1979).

Nevertheless, the term U-turn swiftly permeated national media after its introduction in academic debates, and the concepts U-turn, I-turn, and J-turn became common in public discourse (Okada, 1971). Although some scholars have criticized this terminology (Wiltshire, 1979), researchers still systematically employ these terms to categorize urban migrants in both qualitative and quantitative studies, while others refrain from using them (Hazama, 2017; Klien, 2020b; Obikwelu et al., 2017; Rosenberger, 2017; Traphagan, 2000).

4. Methods and field sites

This paper draws on data gathered from a comparative ethnographic study conducted both online and in Japan in two municipalities in northern Kyūshū: Buzen, located in Fukuoka Prefecture, and Hasami, situated in Nagasaki Prefecture.¹ Buzen, with a population of approximately 23,000 inhabitants, is located in a picturesque rural landscape extending from the mountains to the sea. Its economy is primarily centered around agriculture and fisheries. Traditional cultural practices like *kagura*² play a significant role in community cohesion. Despite its charm, Buzen faces challenges stemming from an aging population, depopulation, and limited employment opportunities. Buzen has seen a steady and rapid decline from 30,000 inhabitants in 1997 to 23,000 in 2024, constituting a loss of approximately 23% of its population (Buzen City Office, 2024a). Conversely, Hasami, with around 14,000 inhabitants, is renowned for its ceramics industry, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Hasami also faces population decline and challenges in establishing a sustainable economic model for its ceramics industry. Hasami's population peaked at 15,700 inhabitants in 1990 and has since dwindled due to factors such as youth outmigration, a declining birthrate, and delayed marriages, resulting in a loss of around 1700 inhabitants over the last decade, equivalent to approximately 10% of its population (Hasami Town Office, 2024). These

¹ I conducted this research as a research assistant in the project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan" (PI Cornelia Reiher) funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) (Project number 442984343): <https://userblogs.fu-berlin.de/urban-rural-migration-japan/>.

² Kagura is a traditional Japanese art form that involves ritual song and dance performances dedicated to the gods during Shinto ceremonies and festivals.

demographic shifts are closely linked to aging communities, with Buzen reporting 38% of its population aged 65 and over in 2020, compared to 31.6% in Hasami in 2019 (Buzen City Office, 2020; Hasami Town Office, 2023a).

The selection of Hasami and Buzen for this study was made in collaboration with the research team, as both municipalities actively participate in government schemes for rural revitalization, welcoming newcomers and return migrants. Both towns witnessed an influx of migrants in their 20s, 30s, and 40s. Hasami attracts more internal migrants than Buzen, primarily due to its job opportunities in the ceramic industry.

I conducted hybrid fieldwork from September 2021 to August 2023, employing digital ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and life history interviews in Japan. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, remote fieldwork took place until October 2022 and focused on online platforms and social media for representations and discourses about rural areas. Through online research, I gained insights into the role of social media in terms of maintaining and establishing important connections throughout the migratory experience. From October 2022 to August 2023, I spent five months each in Buzen and Hasami, conducting participant observation of interactions between migrants and locals and experiencing the environment firsthand. While in the field, I engaged with locals, migrants, and local authorities in different situations. I met over 70 migrants; recorded interviews with 25 migrants (see Table 1) and 3 locals and documented 8 life histories. Except for two English-language interviews, all were conducted in Japanese. Semi-structured interviews, both online and in-person, employed a biographical approach to understand mobility patterns and relocate the experience of migration within the life of the person (Berg, 2020). Discussions delved into migrants' narratives and discourses about rural post-migration life and past urban experiences. I use pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

5. Urban-rural migration terminology in support-schemes initiated by local and prefectural governments

While *den'en kaiki* and the IUJ-turn terminology emerged from academic debates, Japan's central and local government complement this terminology with the distinction between *ijū* (migration) and *teijū* (settlement) to differentiate the acts of moving and settling down. These terms are commonly employed by authorities to frame the migration phenomenon and identify migrants, referred to as *ijūsha*, along with their settlement process, known as *teijū suru*. As shown, administrations at various levels of the Japanese system have introduced an array of support mechanisms for prospective migrants. The initiatives employed by central and local governments to counteract rural depopulation encompass diverse strategies aimed at boosting the population, including economic support for relocation.

In the case of Hasami and Buzen, both towns offer an *akiya-bank* service, a list of vacant properties for sale or rent, and a "trial house" or *otameshi-jūtaku*, where prospective migrants can stay for up to 30 days at a discounted rate (¥1000 per night) to acquaint themselves with the area before deciding to relocate. Hasami stands out with a dedicated website offering comprehensive town life information (Iktsuarpok, 2022) and a team at the city hall dedicated to promoting the town to potential migrants and supporting newcomers. In addition to the *akiya-bank*, Hasami also offers an *akikōbo-bank*, providing vacant warehouses and workshops for entrepreneurs and artisans.

Hasami also supports newcomers through specific economic incentives like the "IJU turn incentive program," *IJU-tan shōrei-kin seido* (Hasami Town Office, 2023b), which subsidizes house rent up to 60,000 yen, and the "Migration Assistance Subsidy Program," *Ijū shien hojokin seido* (Hasami Town Office, 2023c), offering up to 350,000 yen for new home construction or purchase, with an additional 50,000 yen per child. Notably, in August 2023 the town introduced a "Settlement Incentive Grant Program," *teijū shōrei-kin kōfu seido* (Hasami Town Office, 2022)

Table 1

Characteristics, life trajectories, and connections to the migration destination of the 25 migrants I interviewed during my ethnography. The cases discussed in this paper are highlighted in gray.

Name	Gender Age	Trajectory	Year of migration	Connection to the place
Yamada Hitomi	F-44yo	Kitakyūshū – Kyōto — Wellington (NZ) – Kitakyūshū – Beijing (CN) – Singapore – Kitakyūshū – Boston (US) – Kitakyūshū – Bogota (CO) – Buzen	2019	Moved to her father’s hometown after her parents already moved back form Kitakyūshū around 10 years before her
Matsuda Noriko	F-42yo	Fukuoka — Tōkyō — Hasami	2016	No previous connection. Arrived as a municipal office employee
Nakagawa Rieko	F-43yo	Ōsaka — Hiroshima — Kitakyūshū — Buzen	2021	No previous connection to the town before moving
Himeno Kimi	F-34yo	Kanagawa Pref — Tōkyō — Hasami	2020	No previous connection - found a job online before moving
Tadameru Aya	F-30yo	Nagasaki – Fukuoka – Kyōto – Ōnojō (Fukuoka Pref.) – Yamakuni – Buzen	2019	Introduced to the tenant of her current house and workshop by a colleague in Fukuoka
Kasahara Miwa	F-47yo	Kyōto – Arita (Saga Pref.) — Hasami	2008	Moved into town from neighboring municipality
Morimoto Sachie	F-42yo	Tōkyō — Kyōto — Fukuoka — Hasami	2006	Joined a friend who migrated a couple of years before from Tōkyō
Matsumoto Yuki	M-45yo	Aichi Prefecture — Tōkyō — Buzen	2011	Moved into his wife’s hometown
Miyazawa Kenji	M-49yo	Hokkaidō — Tōkyō — California (US) — Mexico — Tagawa (Fukuoka Prefecture) — Buzen	2019	Managed to find a house thanks to a connection within the same network of self-sufficient farmers
Miyazawa Mei	F-34yo	Tōkyō — Lyon (FR) — Tagawa (Fukuoka Pref.) — Buzen	2019	Moved with her husband, Miyazawa Kenji
Kurihara Mori	M-50yo	Kitakyūshū – Fukuoka – Tōkyō – Itoshima (Fukuoka Pref.) – Buzen	2010	Moved back to his grandparents’ house
Ishii Kanae	F-43yo	Saga — Taketa (Oita Prefecture) —Copenhagen (DK) — Barcelona (ES) — Morocco — Istanbul (TR) — Israel — India — Itoshima (Fukuoka Pref.) — Buzen	2010	Came with her husband, Kurihara Mori
Okazaki Mari	F-31yo	Tōkyō — Maine (USA) — Tōkyō — Colombo (LK) — Nakatsu (Oita pref.)	2021	No previous connection to the town before moving. Got into a circle of urban migrants after meeting one at her daughter childcare
Watajima Sayaka	F-50yo	Tōkyō — Buzen	2022	In contact with the local community

Table 1 (continued)

Name	Gender Age	Trajectory	Year of migration	Connection to the place
Susuda Kentaro	M-34yo	Yokohama — Buzen	2022	of urban migrants online Sayaka’s partner. They came together
Hijino Yusuke	M-53yo	Kyōto – Ōsaka – Brisbane (AU) – Hasami	2020	No previous connection. Arrived as a municipal office employee
Fukase Mika	F-24yo	Nagasaki — Hasami	2022	No previous connection - found a job online before moving
Masahisa Nami	F-40yo	Hometown – Tōkyō – Paris (FR) – Tōkyō – Hasami	2021	Moved back to her hometown and currently lives with her parents
Kamiyama Isamu	M-44yo	Kumamoto Pref. — Arita (Saga Pref.) — Hasami	2014	Moved into town from neighboring municipality with his wife, Kamiyama Nora
Kamiyama Nora	F-39yo	Düsseldorf (DE) — Halle (DE) — Arita (Saga Pref.) — Hasami	2014	Moved into town from neighboring municipality with her husband, Kamiyama Isamu
Ji Huang	M-28yo	Beijing (CN) — Fukuoka — Hasami	2022	No previous connection - found a job online before moving
Hattori Yukie	F-34yo	Tōkyō — Hanoi (VN) — Nagoya — Tōkyō — Hasami	2023	No previous connection - found a job online before moving
Fukuzawa Eiko	F-33yo	Ōita Pref. —Tōkyō — London (UK) — Fukuoka — Hasami — Arita (saga Pref.)	2013	No previous connection - found a job online before moving
Suzuki Risa	F-43yo	Nagasaki – Shimane prefecture – San Francisco (US) –Nagasaki – Hasami	2018	No previous connection to the town before moving
Kawauchi Hisae	F-34yo	Fukuoka — Tōkyō — Nagoya — Hasami	2023	No previous connection - found a job online before moving

aimed at migrants from the Tokyo area to relocate and work in town, offering up to 350,000 yen, plus 50,000 yen per child. These support programs cannot be combined with prefectural and national programs but are designed to complement them, with submission criteria covering categories excluded from other funding programs.

Buzen also provides support, including healthcare services for the elderly, grants for house renovations, and subsidies for new mothers, births, and childcare (Buzen City Office, 2021). The “Buzen City Settlement Promotion Subsidy System,” *Buzen-shi teijū sokushin hojokin seido*, subsidizes house construction for those buying city-owned land. The scheme offers 200,000 yen, with an additional 500,000 yen per child. While newcomers can receive an additional 500,000 yen under this system, subsidies in Buzen are not specifically tailored for newcomers and are available to all residents of the town, regardless of whether they currently reside there or plan to move in (Buzen City Office, 2021,2024c).

While the UIJ-turn terminology is present but not prominent in online and offline discourses about internal migration in both municipalities, the *ijū/teijū* distinction is featured prominently on municipal

websites. For instance, Hasami's municipal website has a page titled "for migrants", *ijūsha-muke* (Hasami Town Office, 2019), and Buzen uses "iju/teiju" for the same content (Buzen City Office, 2024b). In both cases, the choice of the word "teiju", to frame the purpose of the grants shows the emphasis on the idea of settlement rather than migration and underscores local governments' goal to secure permanent residents to counter depopulation. Hasami gathered the different grants under the title "Settlement incentives," *teiju shōrei-kin*, while Buzen named the scheme "Settlement Promotion Subsidy System," *Buzen-shi teiju sokushin hojokin seido*. A promotional video for Buzen showcases a young girl exploring housing options and local amenities in various towns of Fukuoka Prefecture, with the series titled, "The settlement journal of the migrant Sumika," *Iju-in Sumika no teiju Nikki*, highlighting the dichotomy between migration and settlement in administrative discourses (Fukuoka Prefectural Government Office, 2021).

Additionally, prefectural support plays a crucial role in assisting prospective migrants. Dedicated websites, counseling centers in prefectural offices, and collaborative events with non-profit organizations (NPOs) provide a comprehensive aid system. Nagasaki Prefecture, for example, offers a general Migration Support Program, *Nagasaki ken iju shien jigyo*, accessible to individuals and families, with subsidies of up to 1 million yen for households and 600,000 yen for individuals. Supplementary childcare subsidies of up to 1 million yen per person are also available. These schemes target residents of Tōkyō's 23 wards intending to relocate to Nagasaki Prefecture, thus rigidly applying the same criteria of migrants' selection that is at the core of the UIJ-turn terminology, i.e., the place of origin. Entrepreneurs can also access the "Nagasaki Prefecture Business Start-up Support Project," *Nagasaki ken sōgyō shien jigyo*, for up to 2 million yen, and the "Nagasaki Prefecture Business Expansion Support Project," *Nagasaki ken jigyo kakujū shien jigyo*, for up to 4 million yen. Municipal governments administer these subsidies, with the liberty to impose additional requirements beyond those set by the prefectural administration (Nagasaki Prefecture Migration Support Office, 2024).

In the dedicated platforms for the dissemination of information and promotion of urban-rural migration, the use of standardized language featuring the UIJ-turn terminology is prominent (Fukuoka Prefectural Government Office, 2015b; Nagasaki Prefecture Migration Support Office, 2020). Larger prefectural and national events, often termed "migration fairs" or *iju-fea*, highlight the UIJ-turn terminology in their descriptions, such as "job search for UIJ-turn," *UIJ turn shūshoku*. Notably, Nagasaki Prefecture's website in October 2023 showcased a vibrant homepage creatively incorporating the letters U, I, and J in its design logo, emphasizing the UIJ-turn concept. Prefectural websites also feature sections containing interviews with former migrants, aimed at both attracting newcomers and promoting their regions. For example, Fukuoka and Nagasaki prefectures showcase migrants' trajectories, explicitly detailing their city or area of origin and the specific municipality they relocated to within the prefecture. These websites categorize migrants' histories according to migration trajectory using the UIJ-turn terminology, allowing users to select the type of "turn" they are interested in. Notably, Nagasaki Prefecture's website further reduces the diversity of patterns by presenting only I-turn and U-turn sections in the dedicated section for stories of "successful" migrants (Fukuoka Prefectural Government Office, 2015a; Nagasaki Prefecture Migration Support Office, 2021a; 2021b).

With small variations, the use of UIJ-turn classification terms and the *iju/teiju* distinction in institutional websites and support system language reflects an attempt to categorize and organize migration in support systems while rigidly defining the settlement process. The UIJ-turn classification, both at the municipal and prefectural levels, does not correspond to tailored economic support for the specific migration trajectories of urban-rural migrants. Subsidies intended for Tōkyō residents only aim to focus on a segment of the urban population but do not address the needs of the specific migrants they target. As used in prefectural web portals, the UIJ-turn terminology compartmentalizes

migrant histories to manage the messiness (Stockdale, 2016, p. 600) of urban-rural migration. It provides a framework for navigating the diverse experiences of past migrants while shaping perceptions of migration trajectories and lifestyle patterns, but the oversimplified representation presents limitations in capturing the nuanced experiences of individual migrants. The *iju/teiju* distinction imposes a time constraint that often appear arbitrary. Administrations have different residency requirements for accessing funding, which can lead to inconsistencies even within the same institution. For instance, in Buzen, eligibility for the house renovation subsidy necessitates one year of residency, whereas in Hasami, incentives for rental housing mandate at least two years of residency. Prefectural subsidy programs typically demand longer residency periods, such as five years in Nagasaki and three years in Fukuoka (Fukuoka Prefectural Government Office, 2023; Nagasaki Prefecture Migration Support Office, 2024).

The use of these classifications significantly influences local and prefectural administrations, guiding targeted policies for rural revitalization, resource allocation, and community integration. Recognizing the discrepancy and acknowledging the reality of migration experiences is paramount for developing effective strategies in these areas. The rigid language currently employed limits the ability to address the diverse needs of migrants, hindering the creation of tailored solutions to support rural revitalization.

6. Patterns of urban-rural migrants in Hasami and Buzen

How does this terminology affect the experiences of urban-rural migrants? In this section, I will highlight the discrepancies between migrants' experiences and the terminology used to classify them. First, I address the UIJ-turn terminology, which categorizes migrants based on their origin and trajectory. Secondly, I compare migrants' experiences with the temporal classification of migration and settlement, *iju/teiju*. I will present the migration experiences of three migrants who are technically an I-turn, J-turn, and a U-turn migrant, who, however, share similar migration experiences. I will then explore the stories of three other migrants, all categorized under the label of I-turn, who experienced migration very differently. To show the impact of the *iju-/teiju* classification, I will then present these six migrants' perceptions of time, migration, and settlement.

6.1. Migrants' trajectories and connections beyond UIJ-turn

Hitomi, a 43-year-old translator fluent in Chinese and English, is categorized as an I-turn migrant. Married to a Colombian, she has three daughters. Born in Kitakyūshū, Hitomi lived there until high school, then moved to Kyōto for university. Her parents, originally from different regions of Kyūshū, retired to her father's hometown in the mountains about ten years ago. Throughout her life, Hitomi has lived alone in New Zealand, China, Singapore, the United States, and Colombia. Three years ago, she returned to Japan to be near her parents, who help with her daughters. With their support, Hitomi established a stable life, renting a house close to her workplace. Despite never having lived there before, she feels a deep connection to the town, rooted in childhood memories. Her migration history highlights the complexity that the UIJ-turn terminology struggles to capture.

Mori, a 50-year-old native of a small town near Kitakyūshū, relocated to Buzen with his wife in 2010, making him a J-turn migrant. After graduating from university in Fukuoka, he spent a decade working in Tōkyō, visiting rural areas and engaging with farmers. Yearning for a settled life, he left his corporate career to pursue farming in Kyūshū. There, he met his wife, Kanae, a farmer living alone in a spacious house. The couple relocated to Buzen, gradually taking over Mori's maternal grandparents' land and house to cultivate the farm and achieve self-sufficiency. Although initially challenging to share a house with the elderly couple, Mori and Kanae said that his grandparents provided valuable support for integrating into the community. They offered

advice on how to behave and introduced them to the community.

Nami, a 40-year-old native of Hasami, moved to Tōkyō at 18 to study fashion and spent three years in Paris before returning to Tōkyō. In 2021, she decided to return permanently to her hometown, categorizing her as a U-turn migrant. "I have never been able to stay away from home for a long time. I always missed my friends and family here. Even in Tōkyō, I returned every three to four months," she shared. Motivated to escape the metropolitan housewife life and rejoin the workforce, Nami consulted with her older brother, who owned the family kiln. They decided she would run a new ceramic shop and café linked to the kiln. The family collaborated to find a suitable location, undertake renovations, and start the business. Currently living with her parents, Nami appreciates the support with her children and enjoys the spacious family home. Her husband visits on weekends, and they are building a new house on land they purchased in town, waiting for him to permanently move into town as well.

According to the UIJ-turn classification, the three migrants above would be classified respectively as I-turn, J-turn, and U-turn migrants, thus having different needs and different experiences of migration. In fact, one of the UIJ-turn classification assumptions behind the trajectories that it highlights is that U-turn migrants possess pre-existing familiarity rooted in past experiences and relationships, while I-turn and J-turn migrants do not. However, Hitomi, Mori and Nami's experiences share more similarities than differences. Conversations with migrants in both towns highlight the importance of meaningful relationships in their migration experiences. These relationships are crucial for finding suitable housing and fulfilling occupations; thus, social networks significantly influence the "success" of migration. At the same time, as the three migration stories demonstrate, a rural upbringing is not the sole factor fostering strong ties with the local community, as all three have had previous connections with their current place of residence through family ties, providing them with a house and/or land, a social network that helped with childcare, employment, and relations with locals. This is in sharp contrast with what the UIJ-turn classification implies by focusing solely on the place of origin.

Different trajectories can lead to similar experiences due to pre-existing relationships, while trajectories that fall under the same UIJ-turn category can be very different. The following migrants, despite being categorized as I-turners, experienced the resettlement in significantly different ways. Yusuke, a 53-year-old from Kyoto, moved to the countryside in 2020 after living in Christchurch, New Zealand, for 25 years. He enrolled in the Community Building Support Staff (COKT) program in Hasami. Initially unfamiliar with the area, Yusuke found the transition challenging due to his lack of local contacts. However, through his job, he met many people, creating connections that helped him find employment after his COKT contract ended in 2023. This enabled him to settle permanently with his family. For Aya, a 30-year-old from Nagasaki who relocated to Buzen in 2019, connections were crucial in her decision to establish a bakery. A former colleague informed her about an available house in her hometown. Initially hesitant about rural life, Aya visited the place and realized it could be a great opportunity. "At first, I wasn't sure; moving to the countryside wasn't my plan," she recounted, acknowledging her friend's assistance in finding a suitable location. Without her friend's help, she would have struggled to find a similar opportunity anywhere in the countryside. Risa, a 43-year-old from Nagasaki, moved to Hasami in 2018 and owns a small shop in a renovated old warehouse, a project she undertook with a local construction company. Drawn to the town's vibrancy, she initially faced challenges due to the absence of contacts and local real estate agencies. Eventually, she inquired about available properties and was surprised by the support she received from long-term residents. Despite appreciating her job and home, she contemplates leaving: "Nothing ties me here; I have no friends in town, and I return to Nagasaki almost every weekend."

Despite their shared urban upbringing, Yusuke, Aya, and Risa navigate their rural relocations differently. Once again, their experiences

revealed how migration is defined by intricate networks of relationships before being a matter of movement direction. All the migrants I met during my fieldwork showed me how resettling from urban to rural areas, sometimes hundreds of kilometers apart, can be deeply influenced by a complex web of connections before, during, and after the move. Even if tangentially, the UIJ-turn terminology captures an important characteristic of internal migration towards rural and remote areas, which is the difference between having some kind of previous relation to the place or not. However, by simplifying migration to a matter of trajectory and at the same time considering them single and linear movements from an A to a B point, the UIJ-turn terminology fails to capture precisely the essence of rural relocation dynamics and migration experiences.

The six migration stories reveal that distinct patterns do not always lead to different resettlement outcomes, and similar trajectories do not guarantee similar migration experiences. A migrant's place of origin is not the sole determinant of their journey; meaningful connections and local support networks play a crucial role in successful integration. Moreover, these relationships, rooted in pre-existing ties to rural Japan, extend beyond individual trajectories. By focusing solely on the migrant, UIJ-turn terminology overlooks the relationships shaping migration experiences. As these narratives show, migration is more than a linear movement; it is a complex journey, shaped by familial, social, and communal ties (Berg, 2020; Gross, 2013; Ní Laoire, 2007).

At the policy level, conceptualizing urban-rural migration through UIJ-turn terminology significantly impacts the municipal support provided to migrants. For instance, while initial economic assistance for rent, as seen in Hasami, may seem beneficial for I-turn migrants, it proves inadequate without subsequent support in securing stable housing post-migration. Conversely, U-turn migrants, who intend to establish roots in familiar towns, may find economic support less accessible despite potentially benefiting from financial assistance to solidify their resettlement. This classification often fails to translate into a nuanced support system. To effectively assist urban-rural migrants, understanding their diverse needs beyond assumptions based on UIJ-turn terminology would facilitate better support mechanisms tailored to individual needs, helping them settle permanently.

6.2. Migrants or permanent residents? Migrant's self-perception vs administrative and residents' definitions

The UIJ-turn terminology is widespread, yet migrants rarely identify with or reference these categories in both online discussions and personal conversations. Instead, they are more inclined to use and discuss general terms such as *ijū/ijūsha* (migration/migrant) and *teijū/teijūsha* (settling down after migration/settler). They are conscious of the implications these words carry regarding their self-perception and how they are perceived by long-term residents. The term *teijū*, in particular, poses challenges for many migrants I encountered. As municipalities and prefectures urge urban migrants to "settle down," the concept of "settling down" becomes ambiguous, prompting questions about what constitutes successful settlement. This ambiguity is echoed by migrants like Kanae, Mori's wife, who questioned: "When can I truly say I've settled down (*teijū shita*)? After over ten years, can I claim to have settled?" Similar sentiments were shared by others. Aya, despite running a successful small business, expressed uncertainty about the duration of her life in the countryside:

I don't know if I will ever be able to say that I have finally settled down (*teijū suru*). I like it here, and I plan to stay for a few years, but I can't imagine spending my retirement in the countryside. I don't see myself driving everywhere at 70. The city is more practical; I prefer that! (Interview with Aya, Buzen, December 8, 2022).

As discussed, "migration" and "settlement" are often intertwined in administrative language, with "*teijū*" serving as a criterion for accessing funding for migrants. However, this notion confines the migration

experience within artificial and arbitrary limits, failing to capture its openness and flexibility (Klien, 2020). Moving out before the period required in the application criteria results in migrants having to return the full amount of money received. The rigid time frame and conditions discourage young migrants from applying for subsidies, especially those who do not have any previous connection with the town and are unable to commit for a long period of time. I encountered migrants who deliberately chose not to apply for funding because they were unsure if they could fulfill such a long-term engagement, particularly among those living in the town for the first time, to avoid the situation of having to return the money a few years later. Furthermore, even when migrants stay for five years or longer and receive funding from the municipality to settle down or renovate a house, some of them will not stay permanently; I encountered migrants who left after ten years or more. This illustrates how the disconnect between administrative expectations and migrants' needs prevents the success of policies aimed at supporting migrants in their resettlement in rural areas.

Examining the use of the term *ijū* also provides interesting insights into inclusion and exclusion in rural communities. Some migrants readily embrace the term, aligning themselves with it, while others refrain from identifying as "*ijūsha*." This distinction does not depend on how long they've lived in the area or their migration trajectory. For instance, Mori and Kanae, who arrived over a decade ago, comfortably identify as "*ijūsha*" along with friends who moved into the area around the same time. Conversely, other migrants I met, despite relocating over 15 years ago, never considered themselves "migrants." They acknowledge their unique relationship and attachment to the place compared to long-term residents but refrain from identifying as "*ijūsha*" because they do not see themselves in the mobile dimension of the term "migrant." Furthermore, the expectation that U-turners might identify less with the term "migrant" than I-turners is not always accurate. Nami, a U-turner, frequently refers to herself as an "*ijūsha*" and features prominently in Hasami's municipal migration promotion materials.

The multiple uses of "*ijūsha*" show how the term can reclaim identity and negotiate belonging. It reflects how migrants' self-perception and aspirations are shaped by the interplay between the migration context and their personal motivations behind the move. The destination plays a pivotal role in shaping their urban-to-rural transition, with differences in economic structure, traditions, history, and geographical positioning impacting their daily lives. Migrants also bring a baggage of past experiences, ideas, aspirations, and hopes from the city, which shape their lifestyle preferences. As these worlds intersect, migrants find themselves negotiating their identity and compromising in their quest for belonging, with the label "*ijūsha*" becoming a tool for navigating this conflictual space.

A common yet often overlooked dichotomy emerges: the division between "migrants" and "locals." Individuals who have lived outside rural areas, whether in metropolitan regions or abroad, tend to adopt distinctive lifestyles compared to lifelong residents. However, this divergence mostly relates to personal choices in the private sphere, such as entertainment, eating habits, individual preferences, and attitudes. Conversations with long-term residents revealed a prevailing sense of detachment from the urban-rural migration phenomenon. Newcomers and established residents often coexist in parallel communities, interacting little beyond neighborly exchanges and local event (Zollet and Qu, 2024; Klein, 2020).

From the lifelong residents' perspective, the definition of a "local" often hinges on familial ties; as Mori noted, "I was surprised by our neighbors' casual attitude. They saw us as family, returning to our roots. Despite having come here only two or three times in my life, having my grandparents here, I believe, changed our neighbors' perception of us." Long-term residents do not differentiate between migration trajectories and places of origin. Newcomers from a different town in the same prefecture or from Tōkyō are often equally regarded as *soto no mono*, outsiders, even after several generations, while migrants with some kind of familial link to the town might be considered locals immediately, even

if they have never lived there before. Kinship is more significant than the *ijū/teijū* and UIJ-turn typologies and having previous familial ties with the town is what distinguishes one newcomer from another.

Although they often live in parallel communities, the locals' perception of who belongs to the community and who does not significantly impacts newcomers' everyday lives. Often, differing perspectives on agricultural practices from older generations of farmers cause conflicts, and newcomers are excluded from community activities, or do not have access to the same information and treatment (Lollini, 2023; Reiher, 2014; Rosenberger, 2017). In this conflicted landscape, identifying as *ijūsha* can help migrants to distance themselves from the local community's way of life, asserting their presence and legitimacy while simultaneously highlighting their unique perspective. Being a migrant is a condition that, while separating them from the way "locals" have lived and worked, opens a whole new set of possibilities for different ways of living in rural Japan. This identity allows them to claim the right to consider the place their home on their own terms. Over time, living as a "migrant" in rural Japan can become a means of asserting one's legitimacy and gradually evolving into a new type of "local."

To summarize, while *ijū/teijū* terminology reflects local governments' expectations for urban-rural migrants and links financial incentives to these expectations, it does not apply to all community members. Not all migrants feel able to commit to a community long term, so these incentives are not equally granted to all of them. Furthermore, the term *ijūsha* is used by both migrants and long-term residents to create boundaries: in the first case by emphasizing their own difference or independence, and in the second by denying inclusion to newcomers. In this context, the element of kinship plays an important role and undermines this distinction from the perspective of lifelong residents. Essential element to define belonging to the rural community, family connections alone are more powerful than both length of settlement and place of birth. To conclude, the common *ijū/teijū* and UIJ-terminology obscures such important mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that must instead be considered for effective support in integrating urban-rural migrants.

7. Conclusion

This paper examines two specific terminologies defining urban-rural migration in contemporary Japan: the UIJ-turn classification and the *ijū/teijū* distinction. It explores their implications in the field by analyzing how they translate into policies and affect urban-rural migrants' experiences, highlighting a significant disparity between these conventional categories and the realities observed in practice. As discussed in Section 5.1, the UIJ-turn classification overlooks the non-linear nature of migration trajectories, failing to account for connections such as friendships and work relationships. Trajectories rarely follow a direct path and are shaped by a network of relationships (Berg, 2020; Bolton and Chalkley, 1990; Dahms, 1995; Klein, 2020; Rérat, 2014). While recognizing the importance of familiarity, this strict classification informs a discourse that translates into support schemes with rigid criteria for access to funding, perpetuating a standardized narrative of urban to rural migration as a linear movement.

The distinction between *ijū* and *teijū* emphasizes the significance of time in the resettlement process for urban migrants. However, it reflects local administrations' goals of transforming "migrants" into "settlers," imposing an artificial limit on the process of belonging that often does not align with migrants' lived experiences. As Berg (2020) states, place attachment and belonging "is relational, performative, and more-than-human" (Ibid., p. 444). This framework creates a paradox where support schemes with rigid timelines to foster permanent resettlement deter potential migrants who hesitate to apply for funding due to uncertainty about long-term commitment. Additionally, in examining how migrants use the term "*ijūsha*" in Section 6.2, I argued that identifying as a 'migrant' allows individuals to differentiate themselves from long-term locals while asserting their sense of belonging, challenging

conventional categorizations (Gieling et al., 2017). Literature on counter-urbanization illustrates how terminology can be imprecise and overlook certain groups (Halfacree, 2001; Stockdale, 2016; Wiltshire, 1979), highlighting the need for researchers and policy makers to critically reflect on the terminology they use and its implications. Current policies aimed at promoting permanent resettlement in rural areas of Japan are often viewed as a response to depopulation challenges, and they hold potential benefits for both migrants and host communities. These policies are designed to provide financial support, infrastructure development, and resources to facilitate the transition of urban migrants into rural settings. By offering these incentives, local administrations aim to stabilize populations and stimulate economic growth, creating environments where newcomers can thrive. However, despite their potential, rural resettlement policies are often based on rigid frameworks that often fail to accommodate to the diversity of migrants' needs.

The non-linear and multifaceted nature of migration trajectories challenges the effectiveness of policies that prioritize long-term residency, alienating those who do not fit into predefined categories. This oversimplification results in support schemes that exclude individuals who could enrich rural communities through their unique skills and perspectives. Many urban-rural migrants navigate complex paths marked by temporary relocations, circular migration, or varying degrees of commitment to their new environments. Such dynamics reflect a reality where the definition of "settlement" shifts based on individual circumstances. Policies that overlook this complexity risk alienating potential migrants and miss the opportunity to harness their contributions, as recent literature highlighted in the case of the COKT program (Zollet and Qu, 2024).

By perpetuating a binary view of migration, existing policies overlook the complexities of urban-rural dynamics, ultimately hindering the inclusivity necessary for effective community integration. Socio-cultural integration is a critical aspect of the migration experience that is often neglected in policy discussions. While policies may focus on facilitating economic resettlement, they frequently overlook the relational and communal aspects of belonging essential for successful integration. Migrants may face challenges in forming connections with lifelong residents and engaging in community life. By prioritizing flexibility in support systems and recognizing the contributions of various forms of resettlement, policies can foster an environment where diverse identities are embraced, ultimately enriching rural communities and enhancing social cohesion.

Smith et al. (2001) suggest that "migration needs to be seen (...) as part of the general mobile rhythms of lives led [that] expresses disjuncture and disruption, but it is always also constructive and creative" (Ibid., p. 2). Public discourse on urban-rural migration in Japan often oversimplifies migrants' experiences, confining them within frameworks that fail to capture the diversity of their realities. This oversimplification influences administrative strategies and support schemes, resulting in disconnects between policy and practice. Abandoning rigid terminology can create adaptable policy frameworks that better reflect the lived realities of the new rural population, fostering a more inclusive approach to migration. Moreover, adjusting academic terminology can illuminate overlooked phenomena, providing a nuanced understanding of urban-rural migration in an evolving world and informing more effective policies and practices for the future of rural areas.

Funding

This research is part of the research project "Urban-rural migration and rural revitalization in Japan" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) (DFG project number 442984343).

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal

relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Cecilia Luzi reports financial support was provided by German Research Foundation (DFG). If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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