

Residents with Connections Abroad and Their Involvement in Japanese Life in Local Areas

～ Tackling Akiya, Community Involvement, and Horticulture ～

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Abstract

This paper presents how people residing in Japan and who have strong cultural links to foreign countries have become involved in their local communities in the country, with emphasis placed on areas outside well-populated cities. Evidence and examples are given to show how strengthening this involvement can be beneficial in tackling issues faced by Japanese society. For the purposes of this paper, projects focused on are in areas that have fewer than 500,000 residents, which are outside the top 30 cities in Japan (Sejiyama, 2022), and includes some areas which have populations of less than 1,000 people. These areas face specific issues as a proportion of their population including Akiya (empty/abandoned housing), diminishing numbers of resident young people, weakening of the services and industry base, abandoned or reduced productivity of farming areas, lower or reduced quality of community involvement due to an aging population, and a dearth of exposure to new ideas and methods. Much of the research was hands-on and is ongoing.

Keywords

Foreign Residents in Japan, Local Areas, Community Involvement, Case Studies

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Introduction

Japan is a country that has not experienced a noteworthy amount of immigration for most of its history. Woo (2022) references research which states that Japan is largely a mono-ethnic society with “long-lasting beliefs in cultural homogeneity.” While large nations such as the United States of America and Canada have relied on mass immigration to boost their population (Aptekar, 2015) with subsequent naturalization being a “barometer of inclusiveness and immigrant incorporation” in a nation (Aptekar, 2015), Japan has, for various reasons, not attracted a significant proportion of foreign residents and has instead relied on domestic increases in population, also referred to as “natural increase” (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2021). To describe this natural population change, we can use the explanation given by Atoh (2008) who summarizes it as “starting from the stage of its stagnation due to both high birth and high death rates in the pre-modern (Tokugawa) period” that ended in 1867, to the “increase during the stage of high birth and low death rates” (in pre- and post- second world war Japan), to the plateau “due to low birth and low death rates” (from the 1960s) culminating in “declining fertility to below replacement level” (from the mid/late 1970s to the present). From January 1, 1873, Japan’s population almost quadrupled from just under 35 million people to over 128 million in 2008, falling back to less than 126 million in 2021 (Atoh, 2008, O’Neil, 2024a, Worldometer, 2025), with the median age of the population during those periods changing from 19.3 years⁽¹⁾ in 1873, to 22.3 years in 1950, to 48.4 years in 2020 (Tachi, 1964, O’Neil, 2024b).

The previous paragraph’s final sentence points to a major issue faced by Japan: that of a rising median population age, and this is expected to continue to rise in Japan to 54.7 years by 2050

(O’Neil, 2024b). While an aging population has certain benefits, there are huge fiscal and social costs to a country when a large cohort of a country’s people age considerably (Mason & Lee, 2017). Aside from immediate economic costs, we should consider the inventiveness of a population as it can predict future fiscal growth and quality of life in a nation. Irmin & Litina (2020) highlight the tendency of aging societies to lose dynamism and the willingness to take risks, and that there is a hump shaped relationship between population aging and inventive activity. Although that hump can be somewhat reduced in form if the older population has a high level of education, it is still evident that a certain age group shows the “peak” of inventiveness. The average age, for example, that Nobel Laureates conducted their prize-winning research was 44.1 years old, with the hard sciences having a much younger age than that of other fields such as economics (Bjørk, 2019), although it takes an average of more than another 20 years before they are recognised. It can be said that Japan would benefit from a shot in the arm of youth elixir in the form of a larger younger population group, and this paper will discuss one such source that is showing the potential to make its mark on its society.

Population age aside, another source of vitalisation for a country is the introduction of new ideas and methods. From just before the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), Japan actively sought out new political, social and economic ideas to incorporate into the country. The Bakumatsu years (end of the Tokugawa/Edo period, in the years just before the Meiji era began) saw a Japanese Shogunate delegation including Eiichi Shibusawa taking the arduous (and expensive) journey to Europe to the 1867 Paris Exposition, and he returned to be “involved in founding and managing over 500 business, including the First National

Bank and the Tokyo Stock Exchange” (Jobu Kinunomichi Management Council, 2022), leading to him becoming known as the “father of Japanese Capitalism” as well as founding the RIKEN (Institute of Physical and Chemical Research). Other such “fact-finding” or “intelligence-gathering” missions to countries including the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, and their results, (and how they were incorporated into the Japanese learning psyche, including the policy of imperial expansionism) are written about in a very accessible way by Takeuchi (1987), included in this paper’s references/bibliography section. With Japan’s young people become more “inward-looking” (Economist, 2021) or, with some pointing the finger at Japan’s “failure to cultivate ‘global human resources’” (Burgess, 2014), it could be to Japan’s benefit to look at its resources of foreign-born or foreign-connected population, including their families/friends/connections living in Japan. In short, immigrants and those people connected to them may have a larger role to play in Japanese society than they do now.

In its release of the tabulation on population and households of the 2020 Population of Japan by the Statistics Bureau of Japan, there were 2.89 million foreign residents living in Japan (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2021), making up 2.3 percent of the population (Statista, 2024). In addition to this number, there are those who have become naturalized (acquired Japanese citizenship), their Japanese-citizenship-holding offspring (from mixed marriages with Japanese citizens due to *jus sanguinis* citizenship), and those Japanese-born people who have spent part of their life abroad or in contact with people from other countries. It is difficult to quantify the latter groups, so this paper will focus on the foreign resident number while keeping in mind that it underestimates

the total figure of those with experience of other cultures. Most of this former group tends to be on the younger side of the working age population, and the numbers in this group who are working age are “considerably larger than age groups (within it) comprising children and elderly people”, according to Statista’s data of the 2019 situation (Statista, 2021), meaning that most foreign residents are likely to be workers and thus net economic contributors to Japanese society.

As reasoned above, there is a large cohort of younger foreign residents who have finished their compulsory education years (often abroad) and are working in Japanese society. Coming from another culture/society outside Japan, it is more likely that they have a different approach to issues than their Japanese peers (in general) and a different skill set, meaning that the two requirements for innovation, i.e. youth and new ideas/methods, are satisfied in Japan if we include and present more opportunities to this bracket living in Japan.

This paper gives information on projects carried out involving the above and explains how the activities are related to a stronger future for Japan. Three projects are included: (1) the Moriyama (Kanazawa City) Shell Renovation Project, (2) the Nakatsukawa (Yamagata Prefecture) Shuraku OS Project, and (3) the Kuwajima (Hakusan City) House/Agriculture Development Project. Difficulties are also discussed and plans for further projects are outlined.

Projects/Case Studies

(1) The Moriyama (Kanazawa City) Shell Renovation Project

The Moriyama Renovation Project was carried out by a team including the author from January 2016, and is described more fully in Lynch (2018). The aim was to facilitate “old, abandoned properties

near tourist areas (to) be purchased”, and then be made “more attractive to ... new accommodation provider(s)” (Lynch, 2018). This, in effect, would turn surplus, unused housing that has a negative effect on the community into a productive asset, improving the local area’s image, bringing people into the locality and resulting in a better living and working environment for residents.

A property was chosen in east Kanazawa (Ishikawa Prefecture) near a tourist area (Higashi Tea District) in the city, and also within reasonable walking distance from the main attractions including the Kenrokuen Gardens, Castle park area, and the Shinkansen (bullet train)-serviced Kanazawa Station. The property was worked on by a team of volunteers, all of whom were people with foreign connections, with the language of communication between them being English. Some local people, in particular the immediate neighbor who owned a metal siding fabrication and installation business, gave advice about local landfill/recycling services available as well as loaning a truck on more than one occasion to carry away waste materials. Communication with local people was in Japanese and was done by a multilingual member of the project team, the team leader, who was an immigrant having come to Japan to work after graduating from university. The project obtained ownership of the over 70-year-old two-story dwelling⁽²⁾ understanding the following:

1. There were termites and evidence of rodents
2. Tatami flooring throughout, which needed to be discarded
3. Leaking roof section at the back, although main roof was intact
4. Various items of no value had been left by the owner (deceased)
5. There were beautiful cedar beams hidden by the drop-down ceiling. These were a factor in

the purchase decision as they were deemed a potential popular feature if the ceiling were opened up.

6. The purchase price was three million yen, including purchase fees.

The following work was carried out:

1. Removal of items and essentially gutting the entire house, including removing some non-supporting *tsuchi-kabe*⁽³⁾ on both floors. Ceiling removal to show the beams under the roof.
2. Termites/pests eradicated and new supports added where necessary
3. House converted to an open plan, and basic earthquake resistance added
4. Upper window replacement, stairs moved

The house was worked on, on a part-time basis for a few hours each weekend, for six months, and then put on sale. An offer matching the asking price of 4.5 million yen was received in January 2017, and the deal was closed by the end of March the same year. The purchaser remarked that the building was attractive as the potential of the building could be seen easily post-gutting and repair, proving to the project team that the house had been made more “accessible” to potential buyers.

The project was beneficial in the following ways:

1. Social: The local people took an interest in the house, which had been abandoned for many years. They had a chance to interact with the volunteers, allowing exchanges of ideas. The purchasers were a couple in their 30s, coming into the local area which had an aging population. The local people were impressed by this, and expressed their appreciation.
2. Local Economy: An abandoned house

can suppress nearby property values. Furthermore, the new owners explained that they wanted to complete the renovation to create guest accommodation, bringing money into the local area.

3. Environmental: Pests were eradicated, and the area was beautified.
4. Monetary: A profit of 500,000 yen was made on the property, after costs. After capital gains tax (42%), it was 290,000 yen. This could be used in the next project or as an investor return of 7.25% of initial capital.

Some snags, issues and risks were noticed during the project, yet the project was successful. It was recommended that grants made available by the city for such work should be made more attractive (grants including local government funding were considered but ultimately not used due to the many conditions attached such as having to use specific and expensive local artisans and materials), the capital gains tax was oppressive for this property which fell into the bought-and-sold-within-five-years category which doubles the tax rate compared to a property sold after five years of ownership, and university research funds could not be used/ invested in this project, putting greater risk onto the shoulders of the researchers involved.

Overall, the project was a success, used the knowledge and enthusiasm of foreign-connected people in the local area, and brought the benefits mentioned above. The project provided valuable research data and skills, and provided the impetus to work on other projects. It was a project in the downtown popular tourist area of Kanazawa city where tourists were putting pressure on available accommodation resources, it was in an area which needed revitalization due to inner-city decay

connected to the urban doughnut effect⁽⁴⁾, and it was a classic inner city akiya (empty/abandoned house). The oft seen in this country style of slash-burn-plant (building complete teardown and rebuild) can be largely unsuitable/expensive for these smaller places due to difficult access and that the houses are joined to the neighboring ones in many cases, so a shell clear out and basic repair approach was followed. This made it more attractive to potential buyers, resulting in a successful outcome despite punitive taxation.

(2) The Nakatsukawa (Yamagata Prefecture) Shuraku OS project

The Nakatsukawa Shuraku OS project was designed and led by Mr. Adam Fulford, who hails from Britain but has lived in Japan for over 40 years. It is another example of how a fresh injection of vision, culture, language, capital, and energy can tackle the decline of vibrancy in an area of Japan faced with an aging population by providing a framework to follow (Lynch, 2021, p83). Nakatsukawa is in Yamagata Prefecture, and had been written about by foreign visitors since the opening of the country in the Meiji Period, such as by Charles Henry Dallas who worked in the area as a teacher from 1871 to 1875 (Matsuno, 1981), and by Isabella Lucy Bird who described it as an “Asiatic Arcadia” in her travel diary during her visit in 1878 (Bird, 1885). Fulford’s Nakatsukawa project focused on the entire town/village instead of just one property.

Fulford was invited to Nakatsugawa and set about identifying the issues faced by the town. He saw how “convenience culture”, a situation common in cities where people get used to, or demand, easy access to resources provided to them by other entities, can be damaging to a society and has a detrimental effect on what he terms as “resilience” (Fulford, 2020).

This links with the 44 disappearing lifestyle values pointed to by Furukawa (2020) that are important for sustainability.

Fulford made a bridge between the local people and outsiders by introducing a “community intern”, a person from abroad who can act as an intermediary between the local people and foreign visitors. Such a person would be paid a wage and accommodated by the local community in return for working with them in their town and bringing an “outsider's perspective” (Margolis, 2020).

New products suggested by the foreign coordinator and/or intern were developed and brought to market, and a local committee was created for planning future sustainability. A business approach allowing the community to thrive in a “self-propelled/self-driven way” (Fulford 2020, 1:40:20) was enveloped in a “Shuraku OS”, meaning a “local settlement operating system”, and connections to communities in foreign countries were forged allowing the model to continue for years to come. For example, a barter system between Nakatsukawa and a settlement in Uganda was set up, allowing each area's goods (and, with them, culture), to flow more freely at a reasonable price. Particular emphasis was put on developing tourism, bringing in funds to sustain and grow the local area.

Fuller's involvement built a robust system that was not only beneficial for Nakatsukawa, but also provided a community involvement template for other rural areas to adopt and follow, leading to opportunities to revitalise the rural cultural landscape (Lynch, 2021), while involving both native talent and skills as well as foreign-connected ones.

(3) The Kuwajima (Hakusan City) House/Agriculture Development Project

The Kuwajima (Hakusan City) House/Agriculture Development Project was carried out from November 2018 to the present, with ownership changing after a period of time, similar to the Moriyama Project summarized earlier in this paper. Contrary to the Moriyama Project, it was not as “research focused” or “time scheduled” as that project, with the researchers working on the project during the COVID-19 lockdown years, making the project more of a “slow burn”. Furthermore, it featured a classic *countryside* akiya issue (as opposed to a city-located one), with an unused house in the mountains of Ishikawa purchased and renovated. The house was purchased for approximately 1.1 million yen, including fees, at the end of 2018. This project had multiple purposes, and was open-ended and vague in its goals, allowing the project to evolve and take advantage of opportunities if and as they appeared. An additional goal of the project was to make people more aware of the countryside areas that often go overlooked, and to encourage the movement of people into those areas for day trips and longer. To that end, the house was given an online presence to showcase the project. This was successful in that people from more urban areas sometimes asked to use the house, and some mountain climber groups requested to stay in the house for a night or two as a starting point to climb the relatively nearby Mount Haku. Those requests were granted, except when major renovations involving serious inconvenience were going on.

The house was a 200 square meter, two storey house on a 300 square meter plot of land in the village of Kuwajima, now part of Shiramine village part of the administrative area of Hakusan City in the southern part of Ishikawa. The population of the village were

very welcoming, and invited the author to many local events. Furthermore, extra farming land was made available to the researchers in the village commons, and was approximately 120 square meters, and this offer was accepted. At a later date, even more land was offered for use but it had to be declined due to researcher time constraints.

The house, built in 1978 when the original village of Kuwajima was relocated to higher ground due to the construction of the Tedorī Dam by the Hokuriku Electric Power Company, was in a liveable condition including a usable kitchen and toilets, yet needed some modernization and additions. Additions that were put in by the authors/volunteers were a new toilet (removing a squat toilet and urinal, modernizing the toilet room, and installing a new toilet, flooring, and walls), a replacement system kitchen (island kitchen type), painting and varnishing, adding decking to the garden to make it more accessible from the house, adding steps and a roofed deck from the 2nd floor to the garden which would also act as an extra fire escape as well as snow accumulation prevention, and some roof repairs. Some electrical work was carried out, and appliances purchased and added. The washing machine area was moved and replumbed, and fusuma⁽⁵⁾ and shōuji⁽⁶⁾ were cleaned and re-papered. The house was painted and cleaned, and garage shelving was added.

A website was created for the house, showing to the public the beauty of the local area, local events, and what was happening with the property. The attached land and commons land was used for agriculture, with advice from the local people. The land was fertilized and improved, and then was used to grow potatoes, sweet potatoes, kabocha pumpkins, tomatoes, butternut squash, carrots, aubergines, Japanese taro, beets, garlic, peppers, passion fruit,

figs, corn, and other fruit and vegetables. It should be noted that the property was about an hour drive one-way from where the author (and project leader) resided, and it was mainly visited on weekends. Due to not being able to visit every week, it was found that root vegetables (which had a lower requirement for maintenance) were most suitable and successful for the situation. Furthermore, as the location was at a high altitude (about 950 meters above sea level) in a mountainous inland area, the cold Hokuriku winters made attempts to grow perennial plant crops difficult, so those were abandoned (meaning passion fruit and figs were discontinued). One side research project was attempted, offering free accommodation to travelers in exchange for some work done at the property, but this was not feasible due to the COVID-19 situation.

Wildlife such as monkeys and wild boars appeared on the commons land, and interviews with locals revealed that many of them had abandoned attempts to grow on the plots due to devastation of crops by those animals. These interviews also revealed that this decline in agriculture in rural Japan is a symptom of a falling population because as the population falls and ages, fewer people are out in the fields (including children playing, people walking in their free time, etc.). With fewer people in the fields, there are times when fields would not be visited for many days at a time. That, coupled with some villages in mountainous areas being abandoned in recent years, has blurred the boundaries between people and wild animals, and wild animals have been expanding their populations and territories in recent years. With few or no people in the fields, animals are often free to take the produce, and this makes people give up practicing agriculture. A local interviewed explained how they imported wolf urine to try to scare off the animals using an

instinct-related process but it had limited effect, while another installed netting only for it to be broken into anyway by monkeys. We decided to invest in netting, together with electric fencing and a solar panel and battery to keep it charged as the commons was about 400 meters away up a hill from the houses in the village. This experiment seemed to work well at the beginning until constant cloudy and rainy weather drained the battery and monkeys broke in. The following year, a larger solar panel solved that problem, prompting another villager to also invest in a solar system and expand their production area.

To manage budget issues, a group including people of various abilities was assembled, and local people were often consulted. Stock clearance sales, for example when buying the new kitchen, were taken advantage of, and auction sites provided us with various building materials such as lumber and paint. Volunteers were rewarded with tickets to the local onsen (hot spring), and provided with food, drinks and transportation. It was found that the heavy winter snowfalls in the area required volunteers to help with snow clearance, and personal connections as well as members of the JET group (Japan English Teachers) provided the youthful energy needed. This, as well as posting in foreigner-visited social media sites also kept the existence of the house and its improving situation alive in the minds of people not only in Ishikawa prefecture, but around Japan too.

The house was deemed “complete enough” at the end of 2021, and it was advertised as available for sale in social media groups both locally and in the English language “Building and renovating a house in Japan” Facebook group, which had over 11,000 members across Japan (in December, 2021). There

was some interest shown, especially in the location due to the skiing area nearby, however there didn't seem to be any serious buyers or, at least, people may have been unable to visit due to the COVID-19 situation. In July, 2022, during what seemed to be a lull in the COVID-19 situation, it was decided to use the house as a social focal point, and invitations were sent out on social media to bring people to the house for a barbecue party. There had been an ennui building up in society due to the restrictions in social gatherings and it was thought that it would be pleasant to use the house as a gathering point, while taking some health precautions. Some of the volunteer group attended, and many people who had never visited the house or area before also visited and enjoyed socializing after a long gap. It was during this time that one of the attendees, a foreign national in his 30s with a Japanese wife, both living and working in Kanazawa city, asked how he might purchase a house like the project house. He was told that the house he was in was for sale, so he decided to consider it.

The potential buyer came and inspected the house the following week, and made an offer to purchase it, which was accepted. They purchased the house in September 2022, and are now living in it full time and, due to its size and location, are also using it as a business premises, having had an internet connection installed. They have rented another empty building nearby from a local person, and are using it for extra business-use storage and as a workshop, and plan to continue with horticulture in the commons field and house garden. The purchase price was 2.5 million yen, which was approximately the amount of money spent on the house by the time, realizing a monetary profit/loss of zero. However, immediate financial considerations aside, the results were that a house that was not being used at the time of the

beginning of the project was now a useful resource, a young couple had moved to the rural local area bringing their business, energy and experience, and the local people as well as the volunteers and project members could enjoy making connections with each other. Furthermore, during the project, various skills were learned on the job. In short, the project was a multi-faceted success and may form part of the blueprint for future similar projects.

Further Projects

What is the next step after the above projects? The following three projects have been opened, and we will see where they lead to:

1. The situation of Izena island in southern Japan has been researched, and visited in March 2022. It is an island that is accessible by road and then ferry from Naha Airport, in Okinawa prefecture. Along with a local interpreter, time was spent on the island and learning about its unique circumstances. It also suffers from an aging population, few young people, and very limited day-to-day interaction with people from abroad.
2. Active work is now being done on utilizing agricultural land in Kanazawa city (abandoned/unused farmland), and this project started from September 2022. In fact, a structure was put up on an abandoned allotment in Kanazawa to house the tools left over from the Kuwajima (Hakusan) Project, making it useful from the very first day. We are now investigating suitable crops, and there is a regular exchange of ideas with others who are farming nearby. The project is being introduced on social media, and is becoming known to both foreigners and Japanese in Ishikawa prefecture.
3. A potential project in the Higashi Mura

area in the north of Okinawa can be seen in the availability of land for purchase due to government foreclosure. OIST's (Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology) "Honey and Coral Project" (OIST, 2021) shows potential to reinvigorate the local areas, provide income, and protect the environment. The possibility of learning from them in parallel with creating branded crops in the area, while linking long-established people in the area with local foreign residents is worth investigating. Climate change (and mitigating the same) is also mentioned by OIST as a reason to focus on alternative methods, and will provide the impetus to try new ideas and learn from people all over the world.

Conclusion

This paper gave many examples of how new ideas and methods brought, and acted upon, by residents in Japan with foreign connections and of working age can result in positive results for entire communities. It can be seen that such people have a positive role to play in Japanese society if guided towards suitable opportunities. It was discovered that the government may need to reconsider grants and taxation rules to make certain projects more viable, and also keep elements of the projects discussed in this paper in mind when devising laws and mitigation strategies in relation to the composition of the population in Japan in the coming years. Three projects were outlined in this paper, and they showed various successes in tackling a number of issues envisaged in the country including social connections, the natural and economic environment, population stagnation and decline, and underuse of property and resources, while giving hints about how a more multiculturally focused society might invigorate the future path of the nation. The lessons learned and

experience gained during the completed projects can be leveraged to ensure improved results in the three further projects listed, hopefully resulting in a virtuous circle of successes. The issue of leadership of the projects is one that is left unsolved for now but, should these projects continue to show results

and, hopefully, become more lucrative (in various meanings), it may be an issue that naturally solves itself by attracting like-minded people who are interested in being involved in such inclusive and mutually beneficial programs.

Notes

- (1) Calculated by the author from Table 4 in Tachi, 1964, taking mid values and an age of 65 for the over 60 years cohort
- (2) The land records showed it was originally a single-storey dwelling but had had a second storey added in 1951, which had not been fully registered. Kanazawa city estimated that the building had been constructed around 1900.
- (3) Wattle and daub walls made of mud plaster mixed with straw.
- (4) The doughnut effect happens when businesses and educational institutions move to the outskirts of a city, often due to better transportation and cheaper land prices, and are followed by an increase in the number of people who want to live nearby. This results in a “hollowing out” of the downtown area, similar to the hole in a doughnut.
- (5) Fusuma is a traditional Japanese sliding door, usually patterned.
- (6) Shouji is a sliding door that is usually located in front of windows or rear exits of a Japanese home. It is a wooden lattice that is papered over, allowing some light through. It is often used in place of curtains.

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