

Mapping out the problem of vacant houses in Japan

a case study of Kochi prefecture

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Abstract

This thesis examines how local residents in rural Japan navigate the phenomenon of vacant houses (*akiya*), to understand the impact it has on their sense of place. The study is based on fieldwork conducted in Kochi prefecture, and relies on data from interviews, documents, photographs, and participant observation. The theoretical framework consists of sense of place theory and ideas of non-human agency, while employing thematic coding to analyze the data. This thesis finds that *akiya* form part of the lived realities of local residents by shaping the way they move and interact with their environment and each other, forming their sense of identity. Sense of identity and belonging is intimately connected to places, and when those places are changing or threatened so do our imaginaries for the future. Therefore, this thesis argues that *akiya* are inherently relational, existing within complicated social structures, both demanding and resisting action from the people around them. This impedes initiatives to solve the issue of vacant houses, and this thesis highlights the importance of considering the aspect of place and agency when developing policy for depopulated areas, not only in Japan, but also in other countries in the region, and beyond.

本論文の目的は、日本の地方において、地域住民が空き家という現象をどのようにナビゲートし、それがコミュニティ意識にどのような影響を与えるかを理解することである。本研究は、高知県で実施したフィールドワークに基づき、インタビュー、文書、写真、参加者観察からのデータに依拠している。理論的枠組みは、センス・オブ・プレイス理論（空間／場所）と非人間的エージェンシーの概念からなり、データの分析にはテーマ別コーディングが採用されている。その結果、空き家は地域住民の生活感覚の一部を形成し、彼らの動き方、環境との関わり方、そしてアイデンティティを形成していることがわかった。アイデンティティや帰属意識は場所と密接に関係しており、場所が変化したり脅かされたりすると、その場所の未来に対する想像も変化する。したがって、本論文では空き家は本質的に関係的な存在であり、複雑な社会構造の中に存在し、周囲からの行動を要求したり、抵抗したりするものであると主張する。これらの性質は、空き家問題の解決に向けた取り組みを妨げるものであり、本論文の結果は、日本のみならず、東アジアの国々とそれ以外の国々からもにおいて、過疎地域の政策を策定する際に、センス・オブ・プレイスとエージェンシーの側面を考慮することの重要性を強調している。

Keywords: Vacant houses, Akiya, Japan, Depopulation, Urban-rural relations, Rural imaginaries, Sense of place theory, Non-human agency

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Annotations

- Names of interviewees have been changed. Interviewees are referred to by first or last name depending on how I referred to them.

- Some names of the municipalities end in -shi meaning city, and some in -cho meaning town. This indicates population size as is shown in figure 2.

- Even though Kochi is pronounced with a long o (*kōchi*) I have chosen to write it with the simple o as that is how it is usually written in English by local actors.

- All translations have been made by the author unless otherwise specified.

1. Introduction

“Vacant houses will save Kochi. Of course, they won’t save Kochi if they are left as they are. The generation of children and grandchildren will continue to live in their furusato (hometown). New families will be welcomed and the number of people in the community will increase. It will become a place where local people gather and smile. Your home’s second story. Why don’t you think about taking that first step now? That vacant house might become tied to Kochi’s genki (revitalization).”

- Written at the top of the Kochi prefecture akiya portal site.

<https://akiya-kochi.jp/>. (Accessed: 2022-05-18)

A growing number of houses in Japan are left vacant, unused and deteriorating. In Japanese this is called the *akiyamondai* or “vacant house problem”. The above quote comes from the website run by Kochi prefecture’s akiya countermeasure team, the “Akiya portal site”. It highlights the dual imaginary in perceptions of akiya (vacant houses). On the one hand they are seen as left behind, useless in their vacancy. On the other hand, they are seen as Kochi’s possible saviors from depopulation. Two words are kept in Japanese, *furusato*, meaning hometown, with strong connotations of nostalgia, and *genki*, a word mainly used to describe people, meaning both healthy, energetic, or in this context revitalization. In this quote the prefecture is a living thing, and in extension, the houses have also been prescribed life and agency to save Kochi.

According to the “Land and Housing Survey” conducted in 2018 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 13.6% of all houses in Japan are vacant (Land and Housing Survey, 2018). Future estimates indicate that by 2033, 30.2% of houses in Japan will be vacant (Oda et al., 2018:1074). Some of these houses are up for rent or sale, or used sporadically as second homes, but many of them are simply ambiguously “vacant”. The akiya problem has become a much-discussed issue both politically and on social media, including narratives suggesting the houses may be a key component in combating depopulation of rural areas. However, as will become clear from this thesis, it is not as simple as the quote above would suggest.

These houses not only pose a safety risk for the nearby structures in case of natural disasters and have a negative influence both financial and visual in the neighborhoods they occur, but there is another dimension to this issue. In this thesis I argue that akiya have a profound emotional impact

on the people living near them. The built environment around us forms an important part of our community, of our feeling of home (Cresswell, 2014:39 Danely, 2019:216). These houses do not just exist in a vacuum, and the vacancy they possess does not necessarily mean that they are empty, only uninhabited. They require care in terms of cleaning or fixing, and attention in their visibility to locals (and sometimes invisibility to outsiders). As such, akiya have the potential to act as non-human actors, demanding interaction, and their vacancy only serves to emphasize their agency. Vacant houses are, as will be explained in the literature review, a symptom of the much larger problem of depopulation, and by studying the symptom, we should be able to learn more about the disease.

Kochi prefecture is in the top 5 of percentage of vacant houses in the country, first counting only akiya of ambiguous status, and is suffering from a shrinking population, and one of the highest average ages of population (*Kochi Population Annual Report, 2021, Land and Housing Survey, 2018*). It is therefore deemed a suitable field site for the aim of this thesis.

Thus, drawing on the qualitative research approach focused on the case study of Kochi prefecture, and informed by both English and Japanese scholarship, this thesis addresses the following research question: **how do local residents in rural Japan navigate the phenomenon of vacant houses, and how does it affect their sense of place?** My analytical tools in exploring this question are centered around the spatial theory and the notion of sense of place defined by Cresswell (2014), where place can be construed as both physical and imaginary at once, shaping movement and sense of identity. As such I also engage with the concept of agency whereby I understand agency as the agent's ability to impact the world around it, whether intentionally or not, and the houses represent non-human actors with capacity for such action.

To explore this question, I conducted interviews with 8 officials working with akiya and 10 residents of Kochi prefecture, utilizing semi-constructed interviews to understand the thoughts and feelings of those living near akiya. I also collected documents related to official policy and regional promotion, as well as photographs, to supplement the data gathered through interviews and observations. I then analyzed the data using thematic coding to map out four dimensions of how residents in Kochi prefecture navigate the akiya problem. These are by processes of mapping akiya, by consciously including or excluding them from their sense of place, by tying them to narratives of belonging as well as natural disasters, and by relating to them in terms of their materiality.

This thesis concludes by arguing that akiya are inherently relational, and by their relationality to humans possess non-human agency in their environment that has an affect on the residents around them and the resident's sense of identity and place, as well as both reinforces and challenges narratives of rural depopulation and revitalization in Japan.

2. Literature review

In order to contextualize the akiya problem, I draw on a body of English and Japanese scholarship to map out the socio-economic and geographical context of Japan and Kochi prefecture to show the changes in social structures after 1945 that led to the akiya problem of today. Building from this broader context, I turn my focus to the issue of depopulation to show how demographic change, government policy, as well as a national shift in the imaginaries of the rural and urban resulted in a depopulation of the countryside and subsequently akiya. Then I turn to discussions on akiya, and the legal and societal framework under which the houses operate to show the roadblocks in solving this issue. Finally, I give a brief overview of the processes discussed above in the specific case of Kochi prefecture and explain its suitability as a field site for this study, both due to it being the top prefecture counting akiya of ambiguous status, and as a prefecture in the periphery struggling with processes of depopulation.

2.1. Changing social structures

In this section I will outline the changes in family structure, work life and social organization that took place in Japan starting from the post-war era and highlight how these changes have resulted in depopulation of the countryside as well as the growing number of vacant houses.

2.1.1 Households, housing policy, and systems of care

During WWII many larger cities in Japan had experienced vast destruction of housing and infrastructure, which promoted a brief increase in rural populations. Additionally, as people living in the former colonized areas were repatriated to Japan they tended to move back to their birth regions. However, this repatriation manifested mainly in prefectural capitals, or larger towns, to the extent that barracks had to be built in Kochi city to accommodate the influx of people (Kochi City History Compilation Committee:2014:330). In contrast to today, post-war Japan was suffering from consequences of overpopulation and the government launched birth control campaigns to curb population growth (Homei, 2016). In 1947 the birthrate in Japan was 4.54, which by 1960 had dropped to around 2.0, and in 2020 it stood at 1.37 (Statista Search Department, 2020). A birthrate of 2.1 is necessary to maintain a stable population, and Japan has not reached this goal since the campaigns, except for a brief period in 1975 (ibid), leading to a continuing greying society.

In tandem with population control the Japanese government was implementing policies to favor homeownership over renting. In 1979 the government implemented what was called

nihongatafukushishakai (Japanese-style welfare society) (Thomann, 2022) with the aim of creating a social welfare system that facilitated care of children as well as elderly in the home, instead of the government providing those services (Hirayama, 2011:153). This system rejected the outsourcing of care for children and elderly to institutions, suggesting that it had led to the breakdown of families and stagnation of the economy in Scandinavia and Britain. Instead, they suggested a form of welfare built on Confucian values of filial piety, where the responsibility of care primarily rests on the family (Thomann, 2022:178).

To achieve this the official stance was clear; families should live together, and one person households were not granted mortgages until 1981 (Hirayama, 2011:156). Ronald & Alexy report that according to public surveys 52% of families in 1955 wanted to buy a house, which in 1969 had risen to 90% (2011:6). However, the marriage rate dropped drastically in late 20th century, and between 1980 and 2005 single person-households nearly doubled (Hirayama, 2014:128), nearing 38% of all households in 2020 (Statista Research Department, 2022).

Additionally, as Japan moved from traditional professions such as agriculture or fishing to industrial production, young people increasingly chose to move away from their families to seek employment, a process that has continued into the 2000's (Nishikawa et al., 2016:1). While three-generational households were the norm before the war, the change in employment caused this practice to dwindle. From 1960-1990 the average size of a household shrank from 4.52 persons to 3.01 nationally, and from 4.85 persons to 3.24 persons in designated depopulated areas¹ (Yamamoto, 1996:97). In 2022 the average household had shrunk to 2.22 nationally (Statista Search Department, 2023), and Danely (2019:219) found that in the case of Kyoto, in 2019 46% of households including an elderly person were single person-households. In conclusion, fewer people have spread out over more houses, when the older generation passes away, the houses are increasingly left empty leading to the akiya problem we see today.

2.1.2 Policies regarding old and new developments

Although this study mainly focuses on the occurrence of akiya in rural areas the issue is also well anchored in urban areas. As the generation born before the birth rate halved are now becoming elderly large communities are emptying in the suburbs (Kubo & Mashita, 2020:11&15). Japan also

¹ An area is judged as depopulated “based on criteria points such as a population decline of 30% or more after 1980, and an index indicating local governments' financial power falling below a certain standard” (Fujibuchi, 2022).

offers reduction in income tax when purchasing new development or houses built within 20 years, rendering old buildings less attractive in urban areas as well as rural (ibid:13). Additionally, houses are largely not being demolished to make room for new development. Between 2005 and 2020 90% of all new houses were built on previously unoccupied lots (Kadomatsu et al., 2020:4). These factors all contribute to housing being left vacant.

2.2. Depopulation

In this section I will outline the scholarly discourse on depopulation in Japan during the latter part of the 20th century. The understanding of depopulation is of great importance to this thesis because of the economic strain a shrinking population has placed on both the central and local governments, the consequences of which have manifested greatly in rural areas. Through processes of depopulation rural areas have experienced shrinking employment opportunities and a reduction in access to social institutions, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of continued outmigration that leads to housing vacancy.

2.2.1 National dynamics

The population of the world may be growing, but the industrialized world is believed to face declines in the future and Japan is on the forefront. Around 2010 Japan's population peaked at around 128 million, and in 2021 it had shrunk to 125.5 million (*Statistical handbook of Japan*, 2022:10). The baby-boomers of the approximate 50's and 60's are now becoming of pension age, and current low birth rates as well as restrictive legislation regarding immigration has set Japan up for an increasingly greying society. According to estimates Japan's population is set to drop to 87 million in 2060 (Matanle, 2014) and the double issue of fewer children being born and elderly people living longer will undoubtedly continue to put a strain on the government's ability to keep welfare services available for all citizens, especially for those living far from social institutions.

In 2021 the statistics bureau of Japan reported that 39 out of 47 prefectures are continuing to experience depopulation, resulting in 82.5% of all municipalities in population decline (Inoue et al., 2021:2). This leads to increasing difficulty sustaining social institutions for the population left behind. One measure meant to counter these has been the merger of municipalities. Between 1953 and 1956, 9,868 cities, towns and villages were merged into 4,668 municipalities. The mergers continued during the late 20th century and in 1999 to 2008, 3,229 municipalities merged into 1,788, leaving only a fraction of the original (Rausch, 2006:137). This has in turn led to centralization of social institutions within these larger municipalities, limiting the access to citizens living in remote

areas, especially to those unable to drive (Matanle, 2014). Additionally, the lack of students in schools resulting from both the decline in birthrate and depopulation necessitates mergers, leading to a growing distance between schools and child-care facilities, which means that houses in these areas that may have been considered centrally located in the past, are rendered disconnected from social institutions and larger society.

2.2.2 Rural dynamics

In Japan the term depopulation (*kasō*) was first used in official documents for the first time in 1967, as a part of a social and economic development plan, and is used to describe an area where it is difficult to uphold social services such as health care or schools due to a shrinking population (Yamamoto, 1996:2). In April 1970, the Law for Emergency Measures for Depopulated Areas was implemented as a measure to reallocate resources from the urban to the rural areas. As it did not generate the results hoped for it has been remodified and extended repeatedly (Shimoda, 2010:116-117), the latest one coming into effect in 2021 (Koizumi, 2022). Furthermore, as early as 1954 the government implemented a local allocation tax (*chihō kōfuzei*) due to fiscal income increasingly centering in the urban areas, with increasing urbanization leading to 91.9% of the total population residing in urban areas in 2018 (Inoue et al., 2021:6). In 2001 this tax accounted for the second largest source of income for local governments (Shirai, 2005:217). This means that rural areas are completely dependent on fiscal reallocation to survive.

Despite the economic strain, the government is set on repopulating rural areas, and the government offers financial support to families willing to relocate. On January 4th, 2023, the Japanese government announced that financial support to families moving from Tokyo to regional areas was to be increased to 1,000,000 yen per child under the age of 18, on the condition that they stay in their new hometown for at least 5 years (Björklund, 2023). This is an investment in hope to increase future tax income for these areas, but as limitations on access to social institutions, and lack of economic opportunities for young people remains, it is doubtful if repopulation of the countryside, and repopulation of *akiya* is a realistic aim for the government unless they address these issues in earnest.

Depopulation in rural communities extends beyond economic impacts. Knight (2003b) reports that it has led to the emergence of “depopulation consciousness”, a shift in mindset where the awareness of depopulation and the lack of results despite efforts to revitalize creates a sense of

communal failure (Knight, 2003b:110). The deterioration of the physical environment, such as houses, and neglect of arable land becomes both a reminder of the rejection of the locals' way of life (Knight, 2003b:111), and evokes feelings of sorrow that the community their ancestors built is disappearing (Knight, 2003a:278).

2.2.3 The urban rural divide and imaginaries of the countryside

As people were moving out of the regions, into the urban areas, there was a change in the imaginary of the countryside. As the Japanese became increasingly divorced from the lifestyles of their grandparents, or great-grandparents, it changed the view of these lifestyles, and what it meant to be Japanese.

Marilyn Ivy (1995) argues that in late 1900's government funded travel campaigns "Discover Japan" and "Exotic Japan" (written in katakana², using the English words) there was a "foreignization" of the countryside, both in use of foreign words, as well as in the advertisement imagery, where pictures of women wearing western clothes stand in front of old temples or elderly people in traditional clothing. It seems to suggest that the traveler is visiting a place that is foreign to them, not a part of their own country, symbolizing modern Japan and a Japan of the past.

In this imagery, the modern traveler holds the agency to explore, whereas the places and people at the destination are being explored. It produces a rigid dichotomy of urban and rural, modern and traditional. The rural represents Japan of the past, a romanticized and almost infantilized picture of a place refusing to adapt to the times, and the urban represents contemporary Japan, where travelers have the monetary and temporal leeway to rediscover their own past. This dichotomy relates to a concept coined by Val Plumwood (1993:49) called "hyperseparation", where "the other" (in this case the rural and its inhabitants) is seen as inferior to the self, lacking in agency and power. She uses this to describe mankind's stance towards nature, or the natural world (including women, indigenous peoples and non-humans), which applies well in this context as the rural seemingly holds no agency of its own. She discusses the concept in relation to colonialism where the natural world is conquered by the urban, creating an unbalanced relation where the urban retains the power over opportunities and narrative of the rural.

² Katakana is one of three Japanese scripts, mainly used for foreign words.

Tied to this urban-rural binary is the notion of *furusato*, a word that means “hometown”, but unlike other similar words such as *shusshin* or *jimoto* has a strong connection to powerful feelings of nostalgia connected to the idea of a peaceful Japan of the past (Greene, 2016; Knight, 1994; Robertson, 1988). While the concept isn’t restricted to mean countryside, it usually evokes images of beautiful mountains and rivers (Robertson, 1988:503), and is commonly used in promotional materials for touristic purposes, products, or politicians. *Furusato* brings connotations of “motherly love” and feelings of being taken care of (Creighton, 1997:242), signifying a strong connection of the Japanese to their motherland. In this imagery the rural is presented as a place of temporary rest, not as an actual place of residence.

Akagawa (2015:41) argues that *furusato* became part of the national narrative after the end of WWII, when the national identity has been shaken by the loss of the empire. The harmonious landscapes of rural Japan went hand in hand with the government’s new focus on peace and domestic prosperity. However, the fast-paced industrialization happening in Japan during this period demanded relocation of workforce from the countryside to the cities. Thus, *furusato*, in its romantic view of the rural, came to represent what had been sacrificed to pursue national prosperity and modernity (Robertson,1988:503).

As explained by Ivy (1995), Robertson (1988), and Akagawa (2015), the national imagery of the countryside was created with the specific purpose of solidifying a national identity of the Japanese people in the post-war period. What this image fails to represent is the actual lived reality of the rural, presenting it as a place to visit rather than live in. It furthermore creates a discrepancy in expectations of country life in those living in metropolitan areas, spurring on the cultural divide in urban-rural relations, which as this thesis will show, leads to challenges to sense of place and identity in both migrants and locals in rural areas.

2.3. Akiya

This section will focus on the legal definition of *akiya*, and their legal and societal framework to explain why *akiya* countermeasures are a slow-moving process. I will discuss issues of ownership and inheritance, *akiya*-specific legal measures, and finally the impact *akiya* have on their surroundings.

2.3.1 Legal definition

Under Japanese law there are four types of vacant houses (figure 1). This thesis focuses on houses not being used, aka akiya in the “other” category.

Type 1	A house that is being used a few times a year, without a permanent resident.
Type 2	A vacant house that is up for sale.
Type 3	A vacant house that is up for rent.
Other	A vacant house that falls under none of the categories above.

Figure 1. Categories of akiya.

Houses that are used by several people on a rotating basis or houses being used regularly but only in the daytime are not counted as vacant but as “unoccupied”. Counting only houses in the “other” category, Kochi prefecture tops the list of akiya in the nation at 12.8% with the national average being 10.6% (Land and Housing Survey, 2018). The akiya in the “other” category are particularly common in depopulated areas in Western Japan (Wakabayashi, 2020:31), and occupy an ambiguous place in their communities, not in use, nor in the process of being sold or rented out, simply left to deteriorate.

2.3.2 Issue of ownership and inheritance

There are two systems pertaining to residential property in Japan that complicate the issue of akiya. These are the registration of building(s) on the land, facilitated by the city hall that has jurisdiction over the area, and property taxes facilitated by the tax agency. These two systems are completely separate from each other, and because of strong privacy laws one cannot inform the other. If the information is used, finding owners and mapping out akiya cannot be outsourced to another branch of government, not to mention private actors.

When an owner passes away the right of usage will technically pass to the next of kin, or the person specified in the last will and testament. This person will now have leasing rights and will be liable to pay property taxes. However, the registration of the building(s) may remain unchanged, or in some cases it may not ever have been registered in the first place. In real terms this means that the

building(s) might be left registered under a deceased person's name, or completely unregistered for generations until someone wants to sell it, in which case they need the building(s) to be registered under their name. Because of this it is not uncommon that municipalities are unable to locate owners of akiya, as they may be registered under a deceased person's name, and the inheritors often reside outside of their jurisdiction. Furthermore, since the city hall in charge may not have the correct information available on who actually inherited the property, there are cases of tax forms being sent to the wrong person. A person owning land with unregistered building(s) could be subject to fines of up to 100,000 yen, but it is not being enforced (Asahi & Takeda, 2022:70), leaving virtually no penalty for neglecting to register, until it's time to sell. Starting next year (2024) inheritors of property who neglect to register the building(s) within a 3-year period will be subject to fines up to the same amount.

Up until 2015 local governments were prevented from acting, even in the case of akiya presenting a danger to the environment around it. In 2015 the "Act on special measures against vacant houses" was passed, which gave local governments the right to act preemptively to demolish houses that pose a threat to the area around them, even without the owner's consent, in cases where the owner(s) could not be found (*Akiyanado taisaku tokubetsu sochihō*, 2021). This law highlights the extent of the practical problem of akiya, where the consequences of it being vacant is pushed onto local government and people, endangering its surroundings to the point of forced action.

As seen above, property tax for akiya may be a deterrent for owners to acknowledge their inheritance, but there is one more legal dimension to this issue that impacts the actions of owners, namely the difference in tax between residential land and unbuilt land. If an owner decides to demolish the house, the property tax effectively becomes approximately 6 times higher, due to residential land being eligible to exceptions from land tax (Asahi & Takeda, 2022:166). This provides little incentive to demolish, and houses are left as they are. As the house is left unused it quickly deteriorates, making it increasingly difficult to sell or rent, as well as depressing the image of the neighborhood. These reasons would suggest that since akiya are basically leaking money from the moment of inheritance, they should be placed on the market quickly, but as this thesis argues, it is usually not that simple.

2.3.3 *Akiya plans and Akiya banks*

Every municipality has their own “Plan for akiya countermeasures” (*Akiya nado taisaku keikaku*). These became mandatory by national decree in 2015 under the Act on special measures against vacant houses, illustrating the importance of this issue to the government. The same plan financial aids such as funds for renovating houses for tenancy purposes, or in some cases selling them (*About the Act on Special Measures Concerning Unoccupied Housing*, 2021). In contrast to the push for homeownership, akiya are usually framed as renting property, and most akiya are available for rent, not sale. Additionally, buildings built before the 1981 Building Standard Law Enforcement Act are excluded from most monetary support as they are deemed to pose a risk in case of earthquakes (*Earthquake Resistance of Houses and Buildings*, n.d.), excluding older buildings from these funds.

When an owner decides they want to sell the house they can use websites called akiya banks. They are usually connected to official municipality websites and are run by the municipality. Prefectural akiya banks exist, but it is the responsibility of the individual municipalities to upload the information. The need for a specific site for akiya, without use of real estate agents, is due to the asking price for an akiya generally being too low to generate a large enough commission to make a living from. Some houses are not even sold but are given away for free (*Minna no zeroen bukken*, n.d.).

2.3.4 *Impact on the neighborhood*

Studies both in and outside Japan show that vacant houses in a neighborhood bring down prices of surrounding structures, as well as can lead to an increase in criminal activity, and anxiety among residents (Suzuki et al., 2022), but the importance of the visual nature of akiya goes beyond this. Danely writes that as new developments were an important image of the economic progress of the bubble era, so do akiya become the reminder of economic downfall of what is deemed the “lost decades” beginning in the 90’s. As argued in 2.2.2 akiya come to symbolize community failure, but Danely argues that akiya, is also a reminder of the perceived failure of Japanese society (2019:228). My data will build on this in relation to national identity and place in 5.2.

2.4. Kochi prefecture – the field site

This thesis is focused on the problem of akiya in Kochi Prefecture as a case study to understand the impact of akiya on residents in their vicinity. This section introduces the history and contemporary situation of the field site, to provide a basis for understanding the space the data for this thesis was generated within.

Kochi has long been suffering from the double issue of an aging and shrinking population. In a 1975 research report from the Faculty of Education at Kochi University scholars worry that Kochi's population peaked at 907,872 in 1959, shrinking by 7.9% over a 10-year period (*Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Kochi University, 1975:1*). In 2021 the population stood at 684,049 (*Kochi Population Annual Report, 2021*), with a decrease in population of 24.7 % since 1959. Additionally, in 2021, 35.9 % of the average population in Kochi was over 65, well over the national 28.9 %. However, as seen in figure 2, numbers vary greatly. During the same period of 1959-69 the number of households grew by 13.4%, and one-generation household became increasingly more common (*Bulletin of the Faculty of Education Kochi University, 1975*), mirroring the demographic changes in the rest of Japan.

This section includes two maps (figure 3 & figure 4) and are provided to orient the reader geographically and to show that Kochi prefecture is located quite far from the administrative and financial centers, on the southern part of Shikoku Island. It is the biggest prefecture, both by size and population on the island, but is located the furthest away from the mainland.



Figure 3, map of Japan with Kochi marked in red.

Due to its long coastline and imagery used in tourism Kochi is often imagined to be an ocean prefecture, but in fact mountains cover 80% of the geographic area. According to Ono (2005) the mountainous areas have been struck hardest by depopulation, especially Otoyochō, a municipality part of this study. This is partially due to a lack of infrastructure, but also due to the decline of the domestic forestry industry. It was in fact in Otoyochō Ono (2005) coined the expression *genkai shūraku*, or marginal villages, to describe settlements where more than half the population is over 64 years of age and thus are under great economic stress trying to sustain themselves. As seen in figure 2, 59% of the population in Otoyochō is over 64, aka most of the population is considered elderly, leading to lack of income for municipal offices.

Figure 2 illustrates the total population, the percentage of the population over the age of 64, percentage of vacant houses according to a national survey done in 2018, and the percentage of vacant houses according to the municipality. I have included the towns I visited. The national survey used samples and thus not all municipalities were investigated.

Name	Total population (2021)	% over 64 (2021)	Total akiya % according to the Housing and Land Survey (2018)	Akiya % according to the municipality
Japan	125,681,593	29.79%	13.60%	N/A
Kochi pref.	684,049	35.90%	18.60%	N/A
Nankokushi	46,373	32.40%	14.40%	Not researched
Otoyochō	3,163	59.50%	*	Not researched
Tosashi	25,597	37.20%	17.43%	Not researched
Nakatosacho	5,804	49.50%	*	13.30%
Shimantoshi	32,288	37.80%	18.00%	9.00%
Tosashimizu	12,056	51.5%	*	30.30%

Figure 2, Source: Municipal plans for akiya countermeasures, Land and Housing Survey, 2018, Kochi Population Annual Report, 2021.

*Not a part of the survey

Figure 2 shows two things. Half of the municipalities included in this thesis have already become, or are very close to becoming, marginal *municipalities*, and the rest have a significantly higher rate

of population over 64 than the national average. The only outlier is Nankokushi, which is most likely due to it being the closest to the prefectural capital, and home to the Kochi University of Technology.

Secondly, the percentage reported in the Land and Housing Survey (2018) may differ considerably from reality, and there is a significant degree of variation across municipalities. Through these numbers it can be inferred that it is still unclear how many houses are vacant, and that current estimates might be inaccurate.

Below is a map of the 34 municipalities of Kochi prefecture (figure 4). The colored areas with English names indicate where data was collected.

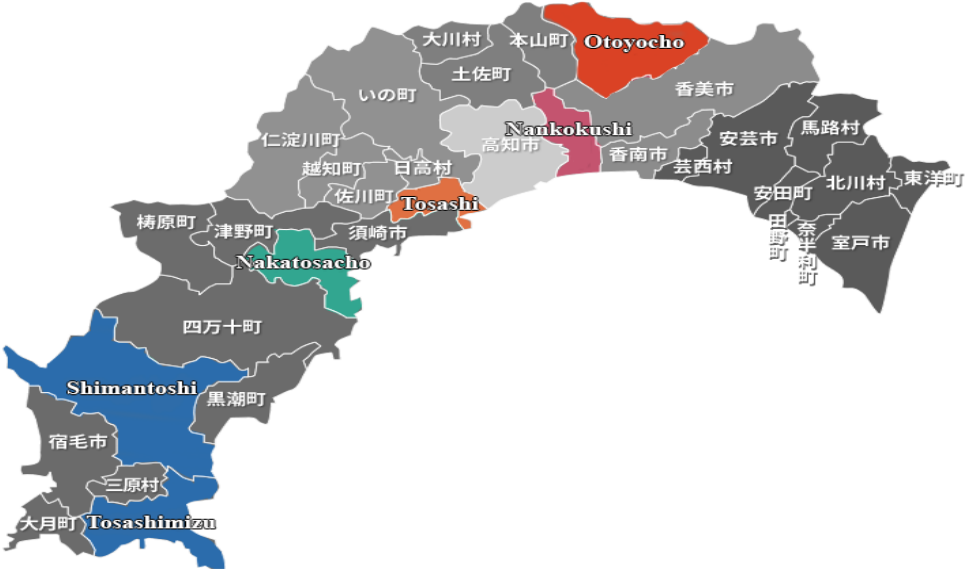


Figure 4, map of Kochi with municipalities I visited marked with color.

3. Methodology

This study has applied a qualitative approach and utilized fieldwork-based methods of data collection in Kochi prefecture conducted between February and March 2023. This section defines the research design, aim, and research question of this thesis, and explains the reasons for choosing the methods applied. It finishes with sections on ethical considerations and reflexivity.

3.1 Research design, aim, and research question

Creswell writes that qualitative research aims to capture “a complex, detailed understanding” (2013:48) of its research subject which cannot be attained through other forms of research. In order to portray the many nuances and social complexities of the akiya problem on the ground level, it was imperative to use a qualitative approach. This study is both inductive and deductive in its approach as I went into the field with the theories of place and non-human agency in mind, but the data has also informed the choice of theory.

This thesis aims to investigate how local residents in Japan relate to and think about the akiya problem that exists within their communities, and how it connects to their sense of place. Therefore the research question is defined as follows:

How do local residents in rural Japan navigate the phenomenon of vacant houses, and how does it affect their sense of place?

To investigate this I conducted fieldwork in Kochi prefecture, using four main sets of data (interviews, participant observation, visual data, and documents), which allowed me to do a multilayered analysis of the akiya problem that concludes that akiya are able to act as non-human agents that impact the imaginaries and sense of place of residents in its vicinity.

3.2 Academic relevance

The academic relevance of this study consists of three principal reasons. First of all, the topic is a current and pressing issue as vacant houses are thought to increase to almost a third of all houses in Japan in 2033 (see 1.0). It is both an issue the government is spending a lot of money trying to counteract, as well as a source of anxiety for residents and owners (see 2.3). Secondly, this is an issue that we are most likely going to see in other parts of the world as well, and looking to Japan that is further along in the issue of aging populations, could give us an indicator on where we as a larger society can move forward in the best possible way. Lastly, while the issue of depopulation has been researched widely, and the vacant house problem as well, to my knowledge the

depopulation problem has not yet been researched through the lens and larger awareness of the akiya problem. Looking at akiya allows us to explore the meaning of sense of place and agency within the specific context of depopulation, to further the academic understanding of the relation between built environment and humans.

3.3 Fieldwork based data collection

In order to develop this project I conducted a 7 week period of qualitative research in Kochi prefecture, conducting interviews and participant observation, as well as collecting visual data and documents.

3.3.1 Interviews

During the fieldwork, I conducted 18 interviews (8 officials working with akiya, and 10 residents). As all my interviewees were told the subject of my thesis before we met, they knew I wanted to talk about akiya, but the questions I asked were designed to be open for them to choose how and when to talk about them. Yin (2009:106) calls interviews in case studies “guided conversations”, and this is the approach taken in the data collection for this thesis. Thus, the interview form was varied, mostly semi-constructed, depending on the interviewee. If I had email contact, I sent my research explanation sheet (appendix 1) to interviewees before meeting, otherwise, I gave it to them in person. I informed them that opting out was possible until the end of April, and all interviewees were told that the thesis would be published online without using their real name. The questions I asked were mainly based on themes instead of prewritten questions, designed to be open-ended and designed to allow interviewees to choose how and when to talk about akiya.

Interviews with residents were based on an interview guide (appendix 2), and the interviews with officials were based on two prewritten sets of questions (appendix 3 & 4). Most of the interviews were not one-on-one, but conducted with a spouse, child, close friend, or in a group setting. This may have affected the data, but it's possible that having someone present made them more comfortable speaking with me and facilitated more personal reflections. The officials were also residents of Kochi prefecture, and the data produced in these interviews showed an interconnectedness between the official and the personal when dealing with processes of depopulation. Overall, the interviews were conducted in a way that allowed interviewees to share their thoughts and opinions freely on issues surrounding akiya.

I opted not to administer voice recordings for both practical and ethical reasons. No interviewee rejected being recorded outright, but I interpreted their answer to be a very polite “I’d rather not”. Furthermore, I was rarely in an optimal setting for recording. Some places were not quiet enough, some interviews started while we were in a car, some while we were walking, and some interviewees were moving around the room either to show me things or to make tea etc. Instead I took extensive field notes.

Directly after the interview I revised the first set of notes, adding observational data and flagging themes I found particularly of interest. Then, I rewrote the notes a second time using thematic coding, first finding the larger themes within the data, triangulating it with documents and photographs, as well as considering my theoretical framework, to make codes, which then provided the structure for the analysis (see 3.4).

3.3.2 Fieldwork as a spatial practice

For interviews with residents, I have applied what O’Neill & Roberts (2020) name “walking interview as a biographical method” (WIBM), where the interviewees and the researcher walk through the area of interest together. While I was only able to do this with a few residents the benefit of this approach is to get a sensory perspective supplementing verbal data. O’Neill & Roberts (ibid:22) talk of WIBM as a sensory practice, not just visual which can be tied to discussions on power (as the researcher chooses the visual and the non-visual) (ibid:23), but that movements, gestures, smells etc. are important parts of our lived realities as human beings. It is a way to collect the data in the space it is generated, which also allows us to understand *how* it is generated, and what that means to residents’ sense of place.

WIBM is a way to alleviate cultural boundaries and facilitating understanding of the “lived experience” of the interviewee (ibid:139). As I want to understand the houses not just as structures divorced from their surroundings, but as non-human actors having an impact on the people around them, walking with the residents and seeing the way they interact with the houses is a way to experience the data beyond verbal information. Drawing maps of the neighborhoods with the interviewees, marking the locations of abandoned houses, is included in the analysis as spatial data, but it was also used to discuss this spatiality of akiya with residents, and make them reflect on the impact the house has on the community. O’Neill & Roberts describe the map-making process as a way to visualize the spaces and places for the interviewees, to allow the conversation to go deeper,

triggering something within the interviewees (ibid:106). Working with the interviewees, having them help guide me through their spaces through walking and mapping, allows for the data to become spatially grounded to illustrate how spatiality of akiya operate and produces agency within their contexts.

3.3.3 Visual methods as a sensory practice

In my fieldwork I have utilized visual methods in two ways. Firstly, I applied photo elicitation during my interviews by bringing pictures of vacant houses in Sweden to show my interviewees. Photo elicitation as explained by Pink (2012:11) allows us to rethink the interview as multisensory. Looking at the images together is a way to connect the interview to the places of interest, as well as produces a shared imagery between interviewer and interviewee in that moment. Comparing experiences of vacant houses enriched the collected data by anchoring the subject in our corresponding realities, as well as enabled me to understand my interviewee's sensory experience of akiya (ibid:12). What they chose to focus on when looking at my pictures then informed the questions I asked, and I was able to refer back to the comments they made then throughout the interview.

Secondly, I collected visual data in my field sites by taking photos. Sometimes together with my interviewees, sometimes before the interview where I could bring the photos up on my phone and ask about them, connecting this point to the former on elicitation. The photographs included in the thesis help the reader visualize the conditions of akiya and their surroundings. Pink argues that "*vision is not just about looking at images; rather it is part of the multisensory processes through which we interpret the total environment in which we exist*" (ibid:7). By including images in this thesis I want to enhance the reader's sense for the places of focus, adding a sensory dimension to the written material in order to more fully understand the reality in which this study takes place.

3.3.4 Documents

During my fieldwork I have collected many documents that were given to me by interviewees. Most of it is promotional material for prospective migrants, some is statistical data collected by professionals, and some is produced as part of revitalization processes. Yin (2009:106) highlights the importance of understanding the conditions under which a document was produced; *why, how, and by whom*. Asking these questions in analyzing material has made clear official narratives and policies, as well as imaginaries of place and community in published materials.

3.4 Case study analysis

Methods for analysis in a case study involves finding themes in the data that provides the offset to describe the case and interpret the data through existing literature (Creswell, 2013:186-187). When I had written the final version of the field notes (see 3.3.1) through triangulation of interview data and my other sources of data I already had an idea of the themes I would explore in the analysis. I coded the data in reference to what Yin (2009:130) calls “theoretical propositions”, or the awareness of theories and literature relevant, using it as a guide. This is akin to thematic analysis which utilizes themes and subthemes derived from the data which is then applied to the data in turn. Themes were identified through repetitions of similar or discrepancy in narratives, indigenous typologies or categories (data connected to the local), missing data (what are they not saying), and theory-related concepts (Bryman (2012:580). The analysis is therefore divided into four parts that represent common themes or discrepancies within those themes found in the data.

3.5 Sampling and recruitment

This study has applied snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012:424) in existing social networks, as well as contacts made prior to and after going into the field site. In choosing which places to contact or go to it was either identifying places that I was able to use public transport to get to or could be driven by a friend and then contacting the city hall in that area to get an interview there as well. This means that my data is restricted to areas connected to public transport, or social spheres I had access to. The sample represented here must be understood as a first step in investigating this phenomenon that could be built on in future research.

3.6 Ethical considerations and limitations

According to Yin (2009:174) the qualitative approach requires the researcher to consider informed consent, transparency in the research process towards interviewees, and awareness of both generalization and over-individualization. Overall, throughout the project I was reflection on the ethical guidelines put forth by the American Anthropological Association. All interviewees were informed on the topic of study, forms of contacting me, and the possibility to opt out of the study. I have offered to send the thesis to all interested interviewees after publication so that they can see what their participation resulted in. I am careful to make claims that exceeds the feasibility of a data set this size and I am conscious of these limitations in my analysis and conclusion.

No money nor substantial gifts were offered as compensation for participation, although I brought small gifts from Sweden, both as a gesture of appreciation and because it is in line with Japanese

souvenir culture. No persons under the age of 18 were a part of this study, and to my knowledge I inflicted no harm to anyone or any place during the fieldwork. As this study took place in the post-covid lockdown I took great care not to overstep boundaries people might have and wore facemasks unless my interviewees took them off first.

The walking method is sensitive from an ethical perspective. The researcher can't escape the fact that all that she sees will be influenced by prior experiences (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020:254). As I have lived in Kochi and have strong personal attachments to the places I visited those attachments may have influenced my interpretations. To counteract bias, I have reflected on these attachments throughout the process. While walking with my interviewees, I asked for consent before taking photographs and refrained from taking pictures with them in the frame due to privacy concerns.

All interviews were conducted in Japanese, which is not my native language. Some of my interviewees had strong local dialects which at times made communication more difficult. I have done my best to ask when I have not understood something and there are a few data points that I have neglected to include as I am not completely sure I interpreted it correctly. I am, however, confident that any miscommunications are minor, and my language ability has not impeded the quality of the study.

Finally, all questions and my interview guide were sent for ethical approval by my supervisor before starting interviews.

3.7 Reflexivity

Being white, Swedish, female, and young has inevitably impacted my understanding of the research subject, as well as the way my interviewees have interacted with me. I have reflected on this throughout the process and informed my understanding and analysis of the data with relevant academic literature from both Japanese and English sources.

During my fieldwork the way I was introduced to my interviewees varied greatly. I usually was introduced by a shared acquaintance, except in the interviews with officials, where I introduced myself. Sometimes I was introduced as a friend, sometimes as the "daughter" of my landlord, sometimes as a student of my teacher, and sometimes as "a master's student". Being introduced places social obligations on the interviewee, the introducer, and myself. The interviewee may not have accepted the interview out of interest but out of obligation to the introducer, blurring the lines of consent. I was aware of these social dimensions going into the field and have done my best to

make sure to respect social boundaries both between myself and others, and those of interviewee and introducer.

In 2016-2017 I spent 1 year in Kochi as an exchange student and during that time I made many of the connections that I was able to use to find interviewees for this study. My personal connection to Kochi has been helpful for this project in many ways as my knowledge of places and culture facilitated conversations with my interviewees. I experienced that my genuine love for Kochi meant that I could relate to my interviewees in a way that made it easier to talk about challenges without them feeling the need to become defensive. However, as mentioned above, it may have impacted my interpretations and I have taken this into consideration throughout the research process.

4. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework for this study; sense of place and non-human agency. In this thesis, my focus on place emerges from my data and my interviewees focus on issues of mapping out akiya, the consequences akiya have on communities, as well as the reasons why akiya are not up for sale or rent. The researched design is informed by understanding of akiya as a producer of interaction between places and humans (see 3.0). As such, my understanding of akiya is relational, part of the social constructions that make up its surroundings.

4.1 Sense of place theory

To understand how spaces become places I draw on Tim Cresswell (2014) and Doreen Massey (1994), who argue that whereas space is undefined, places are socially constructed and is prescribed meaning through our interaction with it. I also engage with Edward Relph's concept of "Placelessness" (1976) to discuss places that are simultaneously anonymous and familiar.

Cresswell (2014:56) argues that places are "instances of wider processes under a host of [...] structural conditions". As seen in the literature review, the houses at the focus of this thesis are instances that exist under conditions that are political, economic, and social. They are a highly visible reminder of loss, both of people and community. They also exist within a political and a legal framework that produces insecurity and stress for those impacted by them, be it owners, municipal workers, or local residents.

When considering place the question of boundaries inevitably arise (Massey, 1994:152). However, this can be complicated as our idea of place is transitional, a fluid concept that flow into each other. My home can mean a room, an apartment, a neighborhood, a city etc. A vacant house has clear physical boundaries, but the way humans interact with them as part of their daily lives can blur those boundaries. The circumference of belonging can be as wide and narrow as is needed and will include and exclude where the consciousness places its claim. This means that the houses at the focus of this study are at times part of, sometimes excluded from, structures of place. This inclusion/exclusion was reoccurring theme in interviews, and these processes show how residents rationalize their sense of belonging, and how they choose to negotiate their hopes for the future.

Place (and in extension, the built environment) interacts with and shape human imaginaries and can make us act, or imagine ourselves acting (Creswell, 2014:36). An example is a person at IKEA,

imagining life in all kinds of rooms that aren't rooms. Cresswell suggests the term "thirdspace" (ibid:70) as a way to consider space as both physical and imaginary at the same time. As outlined in the literature review, there exists powerful imaginaries of place concerning rural Japan, and the coming analysis chapter will reaffirm this and firmly place akiya within these imaginaries.

On a final note, Relph (1976) argues that places also can become "placeless". Placelessness is a concept used to mean standardized places that have lost individuality. I.e., McDonalds restaurants, malls, or airports. Relph (1976) suggests that placelessness produces a detachment between built environment and human actors, who are thus less likely to form emotional connections to placeless places. Placeless places can be familiar but foreign at the same time, neither yours, nor anyone else's. It is different from loss of place as in placeless places, there was never a sense of place to lose.

Building on the understanding of meaning of place in the paragraphs above, my understanding of space is presented thusly; places form part of our lived realities by shaping how we move and interact with our environment and each other, but it furthermore forms our understanding of ourselves. Our sense of identity and belonging is intimately connected to places, and when those places are changing or even threatened so do our imaginaries for the future.

I would also like to acknowledge that space and place has become virtual, and much of the promotional materials produced by towns engaging in revitalization is on the internet, extending the creation of sense of place to the virtual world. Furthermore, the people working with vacant houses in Kochi use google maps to survey the state of the house before physically going there. Due to the limitations of this thesis this is unfortunately not explored further, but it would be a worthy endeavor for future studies.

4.2 Houses as non-human agents

In this section I consider the entanglements of akiya and people's sense of place to highlight akiya as sites of agency and agents in their own right.

To understand how houses become non-human agents I first turn to Bourdieu who in "*The Berber House*" (1979) discuss the way the different sections, directions, and even light in the Berber house shape human behavior within it. The house functions not only as a structure that shelters its inhabitants from the elements, but allows and disallows certain tasks, as well as restricts the movement of the humans within its walls. Physical space shapes our social space (Bourdieu,

1989:16-17), our relationship with each other and ourselves, but social space also dictates how we act within physical space. Houses are a physical representation of lifestyle, values, and relationships. Living in a house contains mutual exercises in care. We clean it and fix broken parts, and it shelters us and provides us with the means to live. Appadurai suggests understanding the value of things or “commodities” as having social potential (2014:6), where their value is negotiated through the social structures in which they exist. As this study will show, the value of akiya may be zero when placed on the market, but there is other value tied to them created by this social potential.

There are also cases where akiya become a burden, possessing the ability to cause anxiety or stress. Many of my interviewees expressed negative feelings regarding akiya in their communities. In Gygi’s (2018) analysis of “rubbish houses” in Japan he argues that houses that are filled with things, rubbish and otherwise, take on new forms of meaning, and as they change, so do the human and non-human interactions with them. Extending beyond the exterior, visual impact of akiya, the houses are rarely empty when they become vacant and the things within them produce “complicated emotions”, a concept presented by Gould (2019). These emotions will be explored in 5.4.

This section has argued that objects possess the potential for agency because they influence the network of humans and non-humans around them. Objects are not completely passive in the social world and the impact akiya have on their physical surroundings as well as on imaginaries of the rural, community, and identity, makes it clear that there is value in thinking of them as non-human agents within processes of depopulation.

5. Analysis

This chapter will present, analyze, and discuss the data collected during the fieldwork to answer the research question **how do local residents in Japan navigate the phenomenon of vacant houses, and how does it affect their sense of place?** It is divided into four parts, each representing a different aspect of how akiya relates to sense of place, identity, and community, arguing that akiya possess a form of non-human agency on the people around them.

The first section discusses the practice of mapping out akiya, arguing that there is a discrepancy in execution and context between officials and residents in such mapping, leading to different understandings of how akiya exist within communities. The second section deals with imaginaries of space, discussing narratives of the rural and akiya, leading to socially constructed boundaries that reinforces feelings of belonging for locals, and feelings of foreignness to outsiders. The third section deals with specific imaginaries related to disaster awareness, where akiya are presented as an imagined place of refuge in case of natural disaster. The fourth and final section presents and discusses akiya, the things within and in their vicinity as a form of problematic materiality that leads to “problematic feelings” (Gould, 2019). These objects are perceived as relational, difficult to dispose of because of their intricate connection to human relationships, sense of place and belonging, as well as religious practices.

The following two quotes illustrate a tension between the official narrative and the lived realities of depopulated areas that will become clear throughout this section.

“It’s like the governor said last year, even though there are people who would like to move here, there are no houses to rent.”

- Yamaguchi, working for the Kochi prefecture akiya support hotline³, interview 2023.02.15

“(These houses aren’t up for sale or rent because) there is no one who wants to move here.”

- Akiko, resident of a small hamlet in Shimantoshi, walking interview 2023.03.24

These two opposite stances to the feasibility of repopulation are representative of most interviews. The official view is straight-forward and optimistic, more housing equals more people. To

³ Anyone can call this number if they need advice or help with issues concerning akiya.

Yamaguchi the houses represent an opportunity, much like in the quote in 1.0. The residential view is more cautious or even, like in the quote above, dismissive. Akiko thinks no one wants to buy a house where she lives even though she loves her community. To her akiya aren't an opportunity, but a fact, an everyday occurrence. An inevitability. These negotiations of akiya in the everyday will be explored throughout this analysis, showing the liminal places in society these houses exist within.

5.1 Mapping out the problem

Strategies for dealing with depopulation issues and abandoned houses differ between municipalities in Kochi prefecture, but one of the key issues pointed out by my interviewees relates to the lack of available housing. I have interviewed 8 officials from 4 municipalities (Otoyochi, Nankokushi, Shimantoshi, Nakatosacho) in Kochi prefecture, and have analyzed the "Plan for dealing with vacant houses" (see 2.3.4) of 2 more town halls (Tosashi, Tosashimizu), who all shared the conviction that akiya are one of the most important tools in combatting depopulation as increasing housing is thought to increase net migration.

All officials in towns I visit tell me that it is difficult to know exactly how many houses are vacant as it is time-consuming to survey, and as large parts of the population are elderly the number of vacant houses is increasing yearly. It is also difficult to balance matters of privacy, as the information on registered owners is not available to all branches of government (and that information may be inaccurate, see 2.3.2), and thus mapping cannot be outsourced to private actors if that information is to be used, leaving the option to survey neighborhoods by knocking on doors. Shimantoshi has spent 5 years surveying the vacant houses and has formulated a plan together with local real estate businesses to renovate and sell the houses in the most attractive parts, closest to the largest settlement Nakamura (appendix 5). They plan to start renovations soon. Shimantoshi's own survey on vacant houses showed that 9% of all houses were vacant, where the national survey had shown 18%. They attribute this to differences in how the survey was conducted, but it is an indicator of how misleading these surveys can be, as well as the ambiguity of what is considered as an akiya.

The fact that that Shimantoshi spent 5 years surveying houses is of consequence as Yamaguchi, an expert in the reuse of akiya, warns that vacant houses sustain a lot of damage after only one year due to the humidity of the climate, as well as the architectural style of Japanese houses (interview,

2023.02.15). We can thereby assume that a house would deteriorate significantly in 5 years, not to mention how many more houses must have become vacant during this time. This means that akiya are temporally sensitive and the process of mapping seems to be like a hydra, where cutting on head off springs two more.

Otoyochō, one of the municipalities struggling the most with depopulation, lack the resources to conduct surveys on akiya and are instead working on a case-by-case basis, relying on information from owners or neighbors. Suzuki, a middle-aged woman born and raised in Otoyochō, working at the town hall for over 20 years, says that city hall only investigates akiya when there is already a prospective migrant. She emphasizes the importance of giving migrants a realistic view of what it would be like to live in Otoyochō, as she says people tend to have misconceptions of life on the countryside. As seen in 2.3, the romanticized narrative of the countryside, or *furusato* (Robertson, 1988), doesn't match reality, and these misconceptions Suzuki speaks of are a manifestation of that narrative.

In 1955 Otoyochō had a population of 22,386 residents, with a mere 8% over the age of 64, which in 2009 had shrunk to 5,492, and in 2023 only 3,201 residents remain, now 59.5% over 64 years old (Appendix 6, Yamashita, 2012:95). Seeing these numbers Suzuki sighs and tells me she is worried Otoyochō will cease to exist one day. I ask her about what she feels about Otoyochō and she struggles to find the words but tells me “it's simply home”. She says it's the place where she will die (Interview, 2023.03.13). In contrast to *furusato* imagery, Suzuki view of Otoyochō is more realistic, but she has strong feelings of belonging tied to it.

Yamada, a real estate agent focused on akiya in Nakatosachō, cites age of the owners as a key obstacle in getting access to the houses, primarily because the process usually requires the owner's physical presence, and travelling to Kochi from Tokyo (usually) can be time-consuming, expensive, and impractical. These distances become a deterrent for owners without temporal, monetary, or bodily leeway to travel. However, as explained in 2.3, leaving the houses as they are means paying the property tax each year, but demolishing them only making the property tax 6 times higher. Adding on top of that the issue of un-registered buildings and the inability to sell them, some of these houses exist in a bureaucratic headlock.

Another issue with official surveys of akiya emphasized in the interviews is that all surveys primarily rely on external impressions. It can be difficult to judge whether a house is empty or not

by visual impression alone, also remarked upon by Danely (2019:226) who describes akiya in Kyoto as “invisible” to outsiders. This invisibility is furthered by structures of community responsibility. One of my interviewees says that when a house becomes vacant in his neighborhood, the community steps in to keep it looking neat from the outside so as not to attract any unwanted visitors (interview 2023.03.14). This act of ‘keeping up appearances’ is mirrored in another interviewee who invites me to her vacant house to help with the garden. When we leave, she says “*it looks like someone has been here now*” (interview 2023.03.12). These are the structured instances that Cresswell (2014:56) mentions, instances of human relations where responsibility for the community extends to the visual, both in keeping it safe from robbers or squatters, but also from the judgmental eyes of the neighbors. These houses exist as a part of a community and are sometimes treated as such, exhibiting a form of agency as an actor with influence over human behavior.

The picture below (figure 5) displays a house that most likely wouldn’t be judged an akiya if it wasn’t for the overgrown garden.



Figure 5. An akiya near Akiko’s house, Shimantoshi.

There is another house just a few meters away (figure 6) where it feels easy to judge from the outside that it is empty. And this one actually is. But there are also similar houses where people still live, at least sporadically.



Figure 6. An akiya near Akiko's house. Shimantoshi.

What I want to point out here is that there are two big issues with surveys, where the houses are not surveyed in general, and when surveyed it is mainly judged based on outside impressions, likely resulting in faulty data. Houses that look empty may be occupied, and houses that look lived in might be empty.

Akiko, a resident of Shimantoshi, takes me for a walk around her neighborhood and tells me about the occupants in the houses, even pointing out which houses are bound to become akiya soon. We draw a map together after our walk and it shows that 4 of the 13 houses in direct proximity to her house are vacant. The house marked with A is Akiko's house, O means occupied, and X means vacant. The ones marked O (x) are houses Akiko points out are at the risk of becoming vacant soon due to the age of their inhabitants and lack of apparent heirs returning.

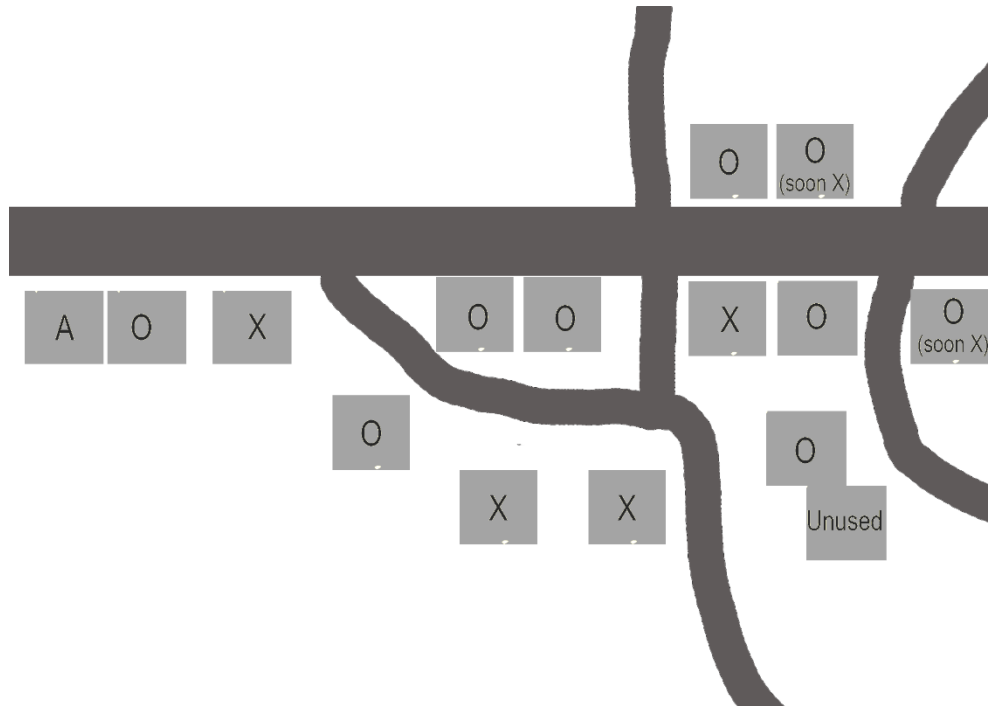


Figure 7. Akiko's house, Shimantoshi.

When I ask her if she thinks the neighborhood has changed since she moved there as a newlywed, she smiles and tells me “Not at all!”. She hasn’t felt a need to change her lifestyle by the apparent depopulation of her neighborhood and is the only one of my interviewees that doesn’t express anxiety over the future. She thinks it is a shame that the houses are falling apart but seems to have accepted an inevitability of depopulation. Tracing this back to her quote in the beginning of this section, even though she loves her community, she is convinced that there is no point in even trying to sell the akiya there. One difference between her and other interviewees is that Akiko’s son plans to move back to the house when he turns 60, so in her case she knows she won’t be alone in her old age and has someone to leave her house, and community, to after she’s gone. Perhaps this provides her with the sense of security needed to accept the new normal of vacant houses in the neighborhood.

5.2 Imaginaries of space

5.2.1 Connections and identity

During the course of the fieldwork, I visit a social event called “salon” in Inabu, Nankoku twice. Both times I sit next to a man called Sato who is happy to tell me about the akiya around his house. Much like all other resident interviewees, he knows exactly who still lives there and which ones are empty. He tells me it is most difficult with the houses behind his, as they are inaccessible by

car. They are also more expensive to demolish for the same reason (field visit, 2023.03.22). Below (figure 8) is the map he drew for me showing his house and the akiya around it. He says that many will become empty soon as the inhabitants are elderly. The ones that are marked “dangerous” are the ones he is worried about will collapse and damage nearby structures and wishes either the owner or the local government would do something about.

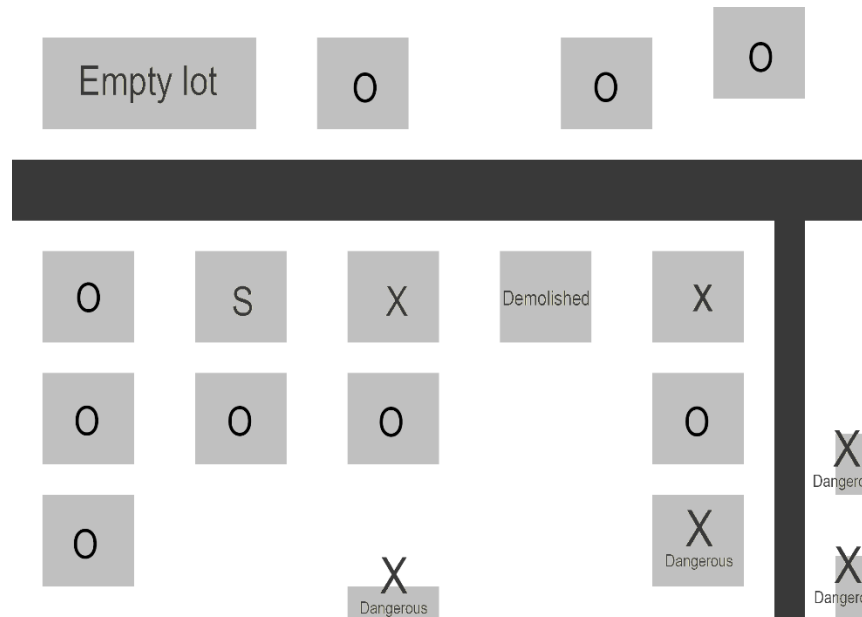


Figure 8. Sato’s house, Inabu, Nankokushi

Sato’s children have left Kochi for areas around Tokyo and Sato doesn’t see them returning, which he attributes to the lack of jobs for them in Inabu, not lack of housing. When saying this he lightly slaps the arm of another visitor and says, “it’s the same with you right?”, the man nods and returns his gaze towards the baseball match we are watching (field visit, 2023.03.22). It is a common story.

In a student report I receive from the salon volunteers a participant of the salon says, “*if the salon happened every day I wouldn’t need to go to the hospital*”, not because she wouldn’t get sick, but because going to the hospital is the only other chance for human connection the woman has (Appendix 7). Hospitals are placeless places, as argued by Relph (1976). They possess anonymity at the same time as familiarity. If there is nowhere else to find connection, the hospital may be the closest thing. They may provide moments of being seen by another human being, reinforcing the self. In an everyday of isolation, these moments may be as important as actual medical care (Kolata, 2019:162-169). The fureaikan however is not placeless, but constructs place, coming to possess what Cresswell calls “living qualities” (36). The fureaikan becomes an actor in creation of meaning

between the human actors dwelling within its walls, encouraging social interaction happening within it, as the physical space allows and disallows certain behavior, connection, and movement.

Suzuki also doesn't think her children will live in Otoyochō, both due to having jobs in Kochi city, and lack of housing. Even though Suzuki herself doesn't consider the area difficult to live in, and expresses deep feelings of belonging, she is certain her children will not move back. In her role as both an official and a resident Suzuki embodies both the official optimistic narrative and the personal depopulation consciousness. Her standpoint becomes one that is inherently complicated but perhaps also realistic. She balances the hope of revitalization success with the unavoidable truth that her municipality might one day disappear.

In Taromaru, Tosashi I interview Ken, an elderly man, born and raised in the area. He is passionate about wanting to turn depopulation around in his neighborhood, as well as preserving local culture. During the interview Ken keeps referring to how Japanese people need to become more *nihonjinrashii* or “Japanese-like”, a quality he thinks was lost after the beginning of the 90's. *Nihonjinrashii* is a concept often used within the essentialist genre of *Nihonjinron*, or “theories of Japaneseness” and attempts to explain a presumed uniqueness of the Japanese based on nationality, ethnicity, and culture, emphasizing respect for hierarchies and a strong sense of community (Sugimoto, 2021:29). Ken thinks that people have become too individualistic and have lost the qualities that made Japan strong in the past. What he expresses here resonates with Knight (2003b) and Danely (2019:228), who discuss deterioration of environment and houses as being reminders of communal or national failure. Ken expresses a perceived cultural change within his own country that has resulted in the rejection of his lifestyle or even his identity, as his identity as a Japanese doesn't match with what he sees as a transformation of Japan's social structures, and a degradation of Japanese society.

He worries that people around him have given up and says that he himself has days where he feels that it is hopeless to try to revitalize the region. The affect depopulation has on human consciousness, is connected to the production of place through social connection. In his article on lonely deaths⁴ (*kodokushi*) in Japan, Danely (2019) writes that a dwelling, which I interpret to in extension to be able to mean a house or a community, is “the emplacement of forms of habituation

⁴ Meaning someone who has died and remained undiscovered for a long time.

that produce the conditions for mutual concern and ethical possibility” (2019:214). This definition, as well as Knight’s (2003a, 2003b) and Matanle & Rausch’s (2011) accounts of lived realities on the Japanese countryside, shows how a shrinking population can affect resident’s feelings about those places, as well as their relationships with each other and their environment. When these connections fail or disappear, so does the feeling of home. Nozawa (2015) writes that even the fantasy of these connections, specifically talking about why ore-ore-sagi⁵ is so common in Japan, can become all but just as important as real connections to people living in lonely circumstances (2015:276-280). The connection doesn’t have to be real, there is power simply in the idea of the connection. So, to turn it around, what happens if the social network still exists, and is real, but the idea of the connections fails? In Ken’s case the sense of community is weakened, not by lack of real connection, but by the anxiety that comes with the possibility of losing it.

5.2.2 *Loss of futures*

Another issue common in remote areas that Ken brings up as well is the dwindling access to social institutions such as schools (Matanle, 2014). Despite this pressing issue Shimoda (2010) reported in 2010 that since the 70’s resources for combatting depopulation issues in Kochi prefecture had been placed mainly on infrastructure and water supply instead of elderly and childcare. When I ask Ken about what he thinks of the future of the region he mentions the last remaining elementary school left in his area. When Ken was growing up he recounts there being about 15 children his age in Taromaru (formerly called Hewa. It is possible the administrative borders were different then), and now there are no more than 4 children of different ages. Lack of students resulting in a merger of schools is common in all other municipalities in this study as well. The elementary school in Ken’s area is set to be closed next year, probably becoming an akiya. He says: *“When the elementary school closes (the region) might lose ikigai... If there are no children, there is no future you can see with your own eyes (interview 2023.03.14).”*

The Japanese notion of *ikigai* is used to describe purpose in life, or a reason for living, and is also a common word used in nihonjinron literature (Sugimoto, 2021:30). The sense of what has been lost and the fear of what is going to be lost is echoed here. Although the number of children here is already less than a handful, Ken fears that the closure of the school is another drop into an

⁵ Ore is an informal masculine first person pronoun, and sagi means fraud. It is a type of telephone fraud where, usually, a young man calls an elderly person saying “It’s me, it’s me!”, emulating a son or grandchild that is in trouble and needs money sent over.

already overflowing cup. When a school becomes an akiya it has a different impact on the community. There is always a possibility that a residential house may become lived in again, but when a school closes down, there will be no more students, symbolizing a loss of a future generation. The fear that without schools, families will leave, is also repeated in several interviews, both with officials and residents.

When Suzuki was a child Otoyochō had 9 elementary schools and 3 middle schools, and now there is one (interview 2023.03.13). When waiting for the train in the wooden station house after my appointment with Suzuki I am faced with a handmade poster from middle schoolers asking people to bring them their cans and bottles for a project on the environment. I google the school and find that it closed down in 2009, marking it as another physical reminder of loss. The ghost of the school haunts the station.

One of the old schools in Otoyochō was bought by a migrant after becoming an akiya around the late 90's and is currently being used as a guest house. When schools close down they don't disappear but are stripped of their purpose and become a physical reminder of depopulation. Cresswell cites Cronon who talks of abandoned mines in Alaska, poetically refers to the remnants of life as "memories that lie so visibly on the landscape" (2014:73), markers of loss and clues to past processes. When I ask my interviewees about the future they express feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, and what these physical markers do is bringing imagination into the physical and the present, representing what has already been lost. As the hope for a next generation dwindles, societal structure is challenged, breaking the promise that there would be another set of hands to leave the community in.



Figure 9. School turned guest house. Otoyochō.

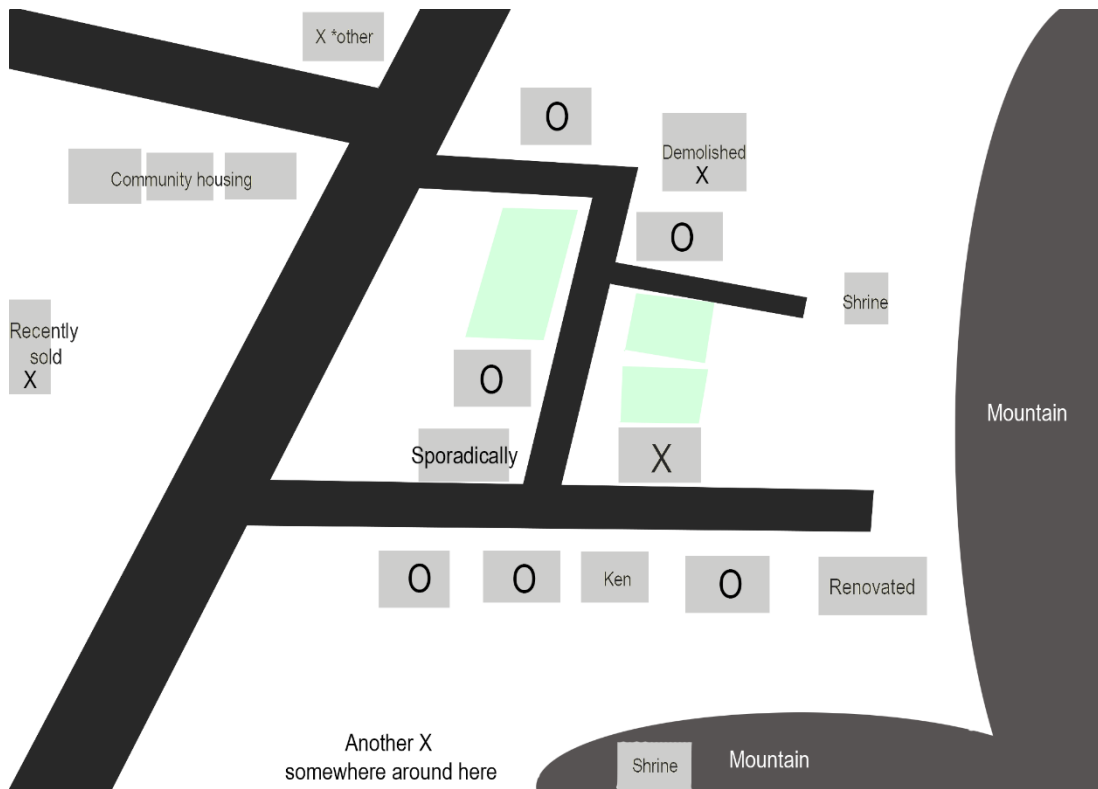


Figure 10. Ken's house, Tosashi. X*other is the one outside his buraku (village subunit).

In Ken's hamlet there are 29 houses in total, and currently 3 of them are akiya. For him akiya means *fuan* (a sense of anxiety or insecurity), this is actually the first thing he says to me as we sit down for the interview. He attributes this to two principal reasons; attracting squatters or robbers, (or strange people as he puts it), and anxiety over a stranger moving in. The second reason is a common thread in previous literature as well (Knight 2003a, Matanle & Rausch, 2011, Funck, 2020, Klien, 2020), where relationships between migrants and locals become saturated with anxiety over potential (sometimes imagined) cultural clashes. To the locals, living in the neighborhood means adhering to unspoken rules and customs, not just moving into a house. The migrants on the other hand might have relocated to avoid external expectations and might not be willing to conform. These tensions will be discussed further in 5.2.3.

When asked if he's ever thought of moving, Ken says that when he was younger, he lived in Osaka and Hiroshima for a while, but that he always felt sure he wanted to return. He says that to leave would be to throw away his *furusato*, a concept saturated with feelings of belonging and national identity (Robertson, 1988, see 2.2). For Ken, *furusato* and the physicality of place goes beyond simply a place of living, it is a part of his identity. He talks of the old traditions, the two separate shrines that the people here take care of, and that he wants to pass on to the younger generation but there is no one to teach. The shrines and traditions left in his care by those before him will stay with him, making his generation the last in line.

A large part of this community that Ken feels is being lost is what the residents Akiko and Ito, a resident of Otoyochō, emphasize as well, sharing vegetables and tasks such as clearing the roads from grass and helping out in the fields. Ito says that as long as her daughter is thinking of moving back at some point, she will keep cutting the grass and tending the fields, but that she is starting to tire. Similarly, when helping out in the garden at an interviewee's house a woman in her late 70's drive by complaining with a smile that she's heading off to pass out documents for the village council. She says she would like to quit, but there is no one else to do it. These tasks were once entrusted to them with the implicit promise that these tasks would one day be passed to someone else, a promise that has failed. The feeling of responsibility for their place keeps them working, even though they express a desire to quit.

To local residents, repopulation is important as a way to keep their community afloat, ensure practical tasks as well as cultural practices will continue after they're gone. However, in research

on urban migrants by Klien (2020:82) she finds that many migrants see relocation as a break from their “real” lives in the capital. By temporarily relocating to the countryside, they can take pause from the expected trajectory of their lives. It allows them to exist in liminality where their past nor future matters and they can explore hobbies and happiness in the moment. This can lead to animosity from local residents (ibid:17), which is also echoed in Ken who says the community needs people who will *shikari sundekureru* (live properly, with purpose) (interview, 2023.03.14), implying that there are people who would not live properly. To local residents the need for a next generation means the need for someone to take over communal responsibilities, which also form an integral part of their sense of community and place.

5.2.3 Borders and boundaries

Despite his devotion to his neighborhood there are clear boundaries to Ken’s sense of responsibility for his place, based on administrative borders. During the interview I ask him about a house not even 100 meters away, that I was told by a friend was vacant, and he confirms this but says that the house is outside of his *buraku* (village subunit) and therefore he won’t concern himself with it. This house is on the other side of an administrative border and is not included in Ken’s sense of responsibility towards his community. As Massey (1994) argues, talking about place ultimately becomes talking about boundaries to that place. Ken reflects clear borders to place and identity, and it is when this place is threatened, he experiences anxiety. Then the failure of securing the future of the community becomes a personal failure.



Figure 11. An akiya a short walk from Ken’s house that is beyond the border of his buraku. Tosashi.

In Kure, Nakatosacho's largest settlement, I meet Yamada who chose to return to her hometown after having worked 10 years in Tokyo. After moving back to Kure she realized that the houses in her neighborhood had started to become vacant due to inhabitants being hospitalized or having passed away. Generally, due to the low asking price of and consequent low commission gained from akiya no other real estate agents in Nakatosacho are willing to take them on, so Yamada decided to get licensed to do it herself. Now she works as a real estate agent and migrant supporter focused exclusively on akiya. She says this however means that her earnings are barely enough to sustain her. As seen in 2.3.3 Akiya can be sold for as little as 0 yen depending on the condition. Although the houses constitute little to no monetary value to her, there is another value in them linked to her personal feelings of place. Cresswell calls "third space", space that becomes both physical and imagined at the same time (2014:70). Yamada's memories of growing up in the neighborhood and her connection to her community is a part of who she is as a person. The attachment to place and community is what drives her, saying that her job is her life since there is no time for anything else.

In Nakatosacho, Otoyochō, and Shimantoshi I receive promotional pamphlets that aim to bridge the cultural gap for migrants by explaining how to navigate challenges and expectations from relocating to the countryside. The Otoyochō one features two short comics illustrating for example cutting grass along the road, and how to deal with village gossip (appendix 9). The underlying message is that migrants should prepare for a culture-clash as they enter the imagined space of their new home. There are certain sociocultural boundaries in place that they need to understand and respect in the community they move into. No specific place is named, which means that this particular rurality is imagined illustrating Relph's ideas on how place doesn't need to be space but can be detached structures of meaning (1976:29). It is not that these challenges or cultural differences aren't real, but rather that the expectation of them make them something more, powerful in its generalizability. The narrative creates a rurality that exists under certain conditions, and it is the responsibility of migrants from "outside" of this community to adapt to these conditions. Furthermore, and of most consequence to this thesis, the construction of this imaginary is the construction of place from space, emphasizing the relational nature of these places, by assigning meaning and context to the undefined to produce an emotional response from the reader.

Yamaguchi from the prefectural akiya support hotline tells me that people mainly want their children or grandchildren to move back and are not as keen on others. There is a fear that they won't be able to get along (*najimenai*). Ken uses the same word to describe his anxiety. Yamada places great care in solving issues of *najimenai*. Her neighborhood growing up was closeknit, and people would exchange dishes and vegetables, and bring in the laundry if it started to rain. She tells me that migrants are confused and sometimes put off by these acts, as they are unused to this level of communal intimacy. She considers the most important thing for successful migration is the relationship between the locals and the migrants, stressing the need for that middle ground of communication, someone that can understand both sides, the way she can. By leaving for Tokyo, she became a part of the "outside" but is "inside" as well. She calls herself an interpreter. She also says that if she feels that a client won't fit in well with the community, she declines to assist them. In her role she becomes both the promoter and the gatekeeper of the community. Yamada inhabits a multifaceted role within her place and is adopting a careful and caring approach to repopulation. She is keenly aware of the cultural difference between locals and possible migrants and works to protect her community's sense of place, both from disappearing, and from changing.

5.3 Disaster consciousness

When talking about akiya many people refer to the Fukushima triple disaster on the 11th of March 2011 (from here on 3/11), as well as the next Nankai megathrust earthquake, earthquakes reoccurring every 90-200 years, often two in succession with a large tsunami following suit. The last ones took place in 1944 and 1946 and it is generally said that the next will happen "within 30 years". Yamada tells me that one of the first questions she gets from prospective migrants is if the area is going to be safe in case of a tsunami. Officials at Nankokushi and Nakatosacho tell me that places right by the seaside (20-30 meters above sea level is considered safe) are difficult to repopulate due to fear of tsunamis. On a drive through Tosashimizu, another municipality with a long shoreline, an interviewee points out the exact line within the town where tsunami isn't a worry anymore. She says that anyone with money is relocating, but far from everyone can. Drawing on the data presented so far it is doubtful that this is true as connections to place are powerful structures integral to sense of identity. However, in terms of the reality of akiya and communities close to the sea, they are placed in a narrative of danger that undermines efforts to repopulate.

On the other hand, fear of natural disasters also presents the opposite narrative for areas in the mountains. Watanabe, a woman currently living in Nakatosacho cites the 3/11 disaster as the

deciding factor in relocating. She says that she always felt like she couldn't keep up (*tsuiteikenai*) with the Tokyo lifestyle, but that it was the disaster that made her relocate to pursue farming in Otoyochō. However, farming was more demanding than she thought, so she relocated again, this time to Nakatosachō. A resident of Tosashimizushi tells me she is in the process of selling her home in Shimantoshi but is hesitating as she feels it might be good to keep it as a possible evacuation site since they live so close to the sea. In these conversations there is a clear theme of the possible danger of disaster, and the idea of the rural mountains as a place of refuge. Creighton (1997:242-243) has argued that there are connotations to “motherly love” and structures of care present in rural imagery connected within the concept of *furusato*, where landscapes of mountains and rivers become symbolic for rest and tranquility. It is an imagery that comes to symbolize safety.

While driving up the mountains into Otoyochō to interview an elderly woman, her daughter tells me that she doesn't see herself ever moving back, but there is a sense of security in knowing the house is there, just in case. This story, this “just in case” scenario is repeated in four other interviews. Often with a smile, but it is clear the thought of where to flee if disaster strikes is on people's minds. The houses in the mountains that are otherwise seen as inaccessible and inconvenient exist within the imaginary as a place of safety if needed, in the liminal space of “before disaster”.



Figure 12. Ito's house on top of the mountain. If the tsunami strikes this will be a definite safe zone. The family grave is located to the left. Otoyochō.

5.4 Problematic materiality

As mentioned above, many akiya are filled with things, so the vacancy they possess might be just the vacancy of a person as seen the photo below (figure 13).



Figure 13. The akiya closest to Ken's house that he looks after. It is still full of things. Tosashi.

In fact, many officials I talk to recount cases of visiting akiya to check its condition, and finding the table still set, soy sauce poured into the dipping plate and glasses half-full. They often contain a lifetime of belongings, which means that cleaning it out takes time and requires quite a bit of money, and as many owners live far away, and are elderly themselves, it can be a very difficult task. According to Sasaki, leader of the prefectural team for akiya countermeasures, this is where a lot of people give up (interview, 2023.02.15). The inability or unwillingness to perform these tasks points to the agency of akiya, as the house demand action from owners who are not able to take said action.

In Otoyochō a non-profit organization have taken it upon themselves to offer cleaning services for houses where there is a prospective migrant, and the city hall will offer monetary support for the cleaning out of akiya starting next year (2024). These funds are distributed from the prefectural office, and many municipalities are doing the same thing as it is a part of the national plan for countermeasures. When asked about whether they would feel comfortable letting someone else clean out the house for them, my interviewees were divided. Some were positive about the idea,

and some felt a bit hesitant about strangers digging through their parents' belongings. Daniels (2010:190) writes that objects like these are although unwanted, emotionally difficult to dispose of as they are intrinsically linked to human relationships, as inheritance or gifts. They become an extension of ourselves and the relation to the gifter. Akiko's house is full of kimonos, delicate tableware, and other traditional items. Most of it is bought, but she is often gifted these kinds of things from others as they know she will receive it. Additionally, Gygi (2018:144) relates this hesitation of disposal to the notion of *mottainai* or "wasteful". A concept that goes beyond the initial meaning to incorporate feelings of shame and regret when faced with disposing something that could still be used. Therefore Akiko's willingness to receive is appreciated by those around her as she spares them the feelings connected to *mottainai*. However, she worries that she will leave this burden to her children when she passes, and wants to find someone to receive it in turn, meaning that the feelings of wastefulness is simply passed on to her, and then, she fears, to her children.

The way these materials become intergenerational is also connected to ritualistic practices related to the dead. In the countryside of Kochi, it is not uncommon to see graves placed near or right by houses, as illustrated by figures 12 & 14. The responsibility for taking care of the family grave has traditionally been shouldered by the eldest son, a tradition stemming from over 300 years of Buddhist funerary systems, but as generational co-living, decreasing fertility rates, and depopulation of the countryside progresses, these social structures are weakening (Daniels, 2010:83). Nowadays families may reside far from their family grave.



Figure 14. Yamamoto's family grave right above the house, presented with fresh flowers. Otoyochō. Graves can also be spotted seemingly in the middle of nowhere. As I was walking from an appointment in Otoyochō I spotted one beneath a bridge even though no houses were nearby. Despite its location, the grave was clearly still being cared for.

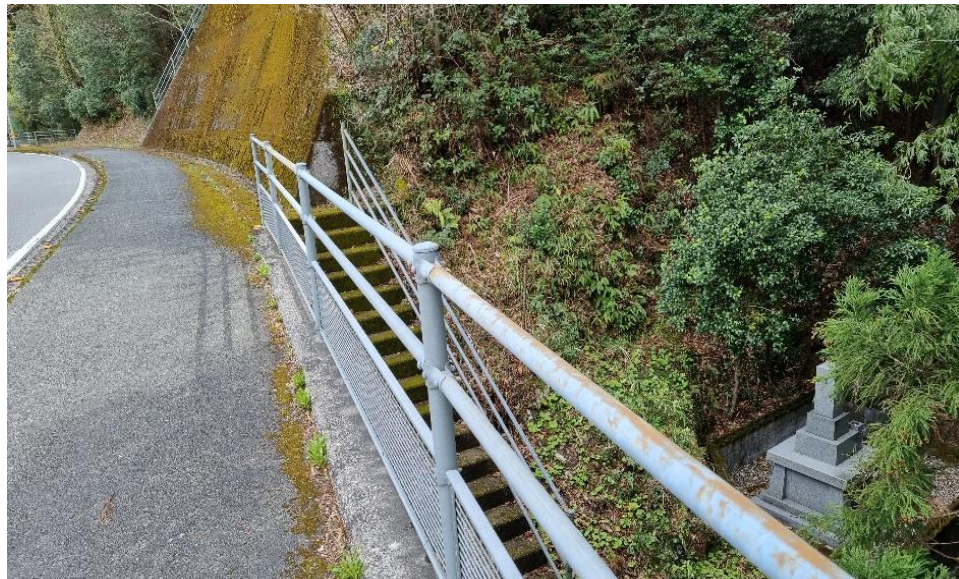


Figure 15. The grave under the bridge. Otoyochō.

Sasaki tells me that, especially depending on the area, this is one of the more difficult issues when trying to get an owner to sell the house. Even though there is no one who wants to live in the house anymore, Japanese tradition of *hakamairi*, or grave visits, require the family to visit at least once a year to wash the grave and pay respect to their ancestors.

Ken has a family grave just a few meters from his house, but when I ask him about it, he dismisses it being a problem as he says he can just sell the house without the grave included. However, there is another set of physical spirituality he considers to be a bigger issue; the butsudān. In almost every Japanese home there is a butsudān, an altar cabinet where offerings are made to the dead. They are usually quite bulky in size and are complicated to dispose of. A migrant couple who has lived in a total of three *akiya* around the prefecture tells me that when they visited one house that was up for rent, they noticed that the butsudān was still in the house. When they asked about it the owner told them that she wanted them to take care of it for her, as well as either vacate the house on days of rituals, or participate in the rites together with the owner's family. They declined the offer (interview, 2023.03.14). It seems that the owner wants the processes of care to continue, but a brunt of that care may be outsourced to strangers.

Even though the significance of the butsudān to the average Japanese has declined in contemporary Japan (Gould 2019:7), these answers go in line with previous scholarship on how sacred waste becomes problematic as even when it becomes waste, the remnants of sacrality in the objects demands certain rituals of disposal (Gould, 2019, Kolata, 2020). The ritual disposal of the butsudān can be done in a variety of ways and requires external assistance, whether from a temple, or from other disposal services (Gould 2019:8&13), which can be expensive. The *ihai* or mortuary tablet where the deceased's death name is written and the deceased is enshrined can be taken out and taken with, but the sacred also resides in other objects within the butsudān, as well as the butsudān cabinet itself. Kolata (2020) writes of a parishioner dropping off a statue he doesn't want to simply throw in the trash but doesn't want to keep nor engage with the religious rites required for its disposal. By leaving it with a temple he can unshoulder the burden, even though the temple in question doesn't worship that particular deity. The statue, and butsudān, are due to the structured instances (Cresswell, 2014:56) in which they exist, transcending their meaning as mere object, becoming part of a place within the imaginaries of the owners that demands certain actions.

For one resident of Otoyochō the grave and butsudān are not the only issue. Her husband passed away three years ago, and it feels too early for her to give the house up. She says that it feels like he's still here. The house is also tied to memories of raising her daughter. She says that sometimes when she looks at the house in a picture, she can't believe it's deteriorated so badly, that when she stands in front of it, she doesn't think it's that bad. This speaks to the significance of the physical,

bodily experience being in a place is. Even though the house is both physical and imaginary at the same time, the imaginary is strongest when she is there physically. By tying a memory to a place we “inscribe it in the landscape” (Cresswell, 2014:120), and the place is allowed to transcend the physical into the imaginary.



Figure 16. Yamamoto - The old house next to the newly built. Both akiya. Otoyochō.

Somewhat in contrast to this, another interviewee tells me that she inherited an akiya from her late younger sister, and she finds it difficult, even scary, to sleep alone in the vacant house she is now renovating as it is too full of “emotion”. It seems that to her, the ghost of her sister still lingers. Even though she now legally owns it, it is not her place, she doesn’t feel like she belongs there. The sense of place that she feels through her relation to her sister puts a boundary between her and the house, making her perceive it as haunted by her sister’s memory.

As Gygi (2018) have argued in relation to “rubbish houses”, the meaning enclosed in these houses and even certain objects in and around them may have been transformed, but they still possess a form of agency how they affect humans around them. The emotional response the house invokes when interacting or even thinking about it complicates future actions regarding selling or even renting the house. In writing about butsudān Gould calls these moral dilemmas and emotional difficulties *kimochi no mondai* or “problematic feelings” (2019:11). The disposal of the butsudān, an object that has been cared for and literally housed the dead, results both in insecurity on course of action, and guilt. A butsudān is in comparison to a house practically easier to dispose of, and a house doesn’t necessarily include the otherworldly component (although as shown here, they can), but they both seem to evoke problematic feelings. Although the house is not sacred as such there

exists a social relationship between the house and the humans around it that demands interaction. The house and its component parts can be a source of hope for a new start, an economic and bureaucratic headache, or a reminder of what has been lost, in many meanings of the word.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has shown that although akiya may not be inhabited, they are certainly not empty. The houses are filled with feelings of place, hopes and fears, as well as objects of varying degrees of problematic context. Being at once physical and imaginary, the houses are tied into a web of social relations that aren't easily navigated by outsiders, or by owners themselves.

As seen in the beginning of this thesis, the official narrative tends to present akiya as the savior of Kochi, painting a romantic picture of the “second story” these houses could have, and the generations of children and grandchildren to come. As a lack of a future generation to keep the region energetic, and practically thinking, take over community tasks, is a recurring theme throughout this thesis, it is understandably a powerful narrative. But it is doubtful if these houses, although prescribed agency in this thesis, have enough agency to accomplish that goal since their agency stems from their relation to their surroundings.

Akiya cannot be seen as components divorced from their surroundings, but must be understood as one aspect of depopulation, *as well as community*, in the places they dwell. The houses demand action as they deteriorate and risk causing visual and structural damage to neighborhoods, but they also resist action by their relationality to people and the landscape.

The emergence of vacant houses and depopulated communities is a likely development for other industrial countries in the East Asian region, and beyond. This study has shown that in navigating akiya residents in Kochi prefecture are forced to renegotiate their sense of place and identity, which in turn produces anxiety temporally linked in both present and future. It has shown that the need to protect their place is more meaningful than repopulation at any cost. Thus, I argue that being aware of these connections and potential of agency of houses and objects is vital when constructing policy regarding depopulation initiatives in the future, as the failure of acknowledging these dimensions is ineffective. Considering the aspect of sense of place and non-human agency is a way to work with local residents, and promote not only repopulation (if that is the aim), but the well-being of the community.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 – Research explanation sheet.

Originally written in Japanese.

I am Julia Olsson, a master's student at Lund University, Sweden, who has come to Japan to do research for my master's thesis. My specialty is Japanese society and culture. I am particularly interested in depopulation, aging society, regional development, and the issue of vacant houses. The purpose of this research is to investigate "the feelings and emotions towards vacant houses among people living around them". I chose Kochi Prefecture for this purpose because I had the experience of studying abroad at Kochi University for a year, where I was first exposed to the issues mentioned above. When I conducted some research on Kochi Prefecture, I found that while depopulation is progressing and the problem of vacant houses is emerging, there are positive activities to address these issues and to revitalize the local community.

In order to reach the aim of this study, I focus on the following three points: First, I will interview people working on solving the vacant house issue in Kochi Prefecture to learn about the current situation and countermeasures; second, I will interview people conducting research on these issues to learn about the current situation in Kochi Prefecture from an academic standpoint as well as programs offered at Kochi University; and third, I will interview people who live in areas or villages with many vacant houses to find out their personal feelings, emotions, and thoughts on these issues.

Points of interest:

Depopulation and vacant house problems in Kochi Prefecture and measures to deal with them.

Research being conducted in Kochi Prefecture on the vacant house problem, depopulation, and village revitalization.

Emotions, feelings, and thoughts of people in the cities, towns, and villages of Kochi Prefecture regarding vacant houses.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

(List of contact information excluded from this appendix.)

Appendix 2 – Interview guide for speaking with residents.

Originally written in Japanese. Used as a guide, not these specific questions.

How long have you lived here? Were you born here or did you move here?

Ask about age and family situation.

Have you lived anywhere else?

Has the region changed since you've lived here?

Have you ever wanted to move? Where? Why?

What do you like about this town? What about it would you like to preserve?

Is there a place here where everyone gets together? Can you introduce us?

Do you go there often? What kinds of things do you do?

How do you think this area could be made better?

Introduce vacant houses as a theme and wait for the interviewee's response.

What do you know about the measures? What do you think? What do you think of new people coming in? What if they are teleworkers (people who work from home)? What about foreigners?

What measures would you personally like to see, what changes would you like to see? Demolition, renovation etc.

What do you think this area will look like in the future? How do you think it will change?

Do you have enough support from the government and prefectural government?

For walking interviews: Did you know anyone who used to live here? How long has the house been vacant? What would you personally like to see happen to this house?

If you had a vacant house in the area, what would you do? Would you sell it? Would you destroy it? Would you consult the city?

Appendix 3 – Questions for the faculty of Regional Collaboration at Kochi University.
Originally written in Japanese.

Please tell me about your personal research. Why did you start your research in Kochi Prefecture?

Please tell me how this faculty was established, including financial resources if possible.

What is the purpose of this faculty (both education and research)? Why was it established in Kochi Prefecture? What kind of programs do you have? What kind of research are the professors doing? If you have a white paper, I would like to see it.

Are there any other universities or institutions that have departments that focus on rural revitalization or solving rural problems? If so, do you collaborate with them in research or teaching?

Are most of the students enrolled here born and raised in Kochi Prefecture? Or are they from other prefectures? Is it okay if I talk to the students?

What kind of work do you do after graduation? Do you have a specific job such as village development that makes use of what you have learned in this department?

Do students typically find work in Kochi after graduation? Or, do they leave for other prefectures? If other prefectures, do they move to large cities, or to the countryside or rural area?

When I was studying in Kochi, I was often taken to Otoyochō as an example of a "rural area". How do you choose which areas to work with?

What kind of policies and measures currently exist in Kochi Prefecture to solve the problem of vacant houses?

Are there any courses or seminars in this department that focus on the vacant house problem? If you don't mind, would you allow me to participate in such classes? Can you show me references and textbooks for your classes?

What measures do you think are necessary to solve the problem of vacant houses?

I would very much like to read the research of this department.

Appendix 4 – Questions for prefectural and municipal officials.
Originally written in Japanese. Use varied depending on the interview.

Please tell me about the specifics of your work.

When did you come to this area and how long have you been doing this work? When did you start this job?

Do you know when this position was established? If so, please tell me about that time.

Where does the budget and financial resources for this vacant house consultation service come from? From Kochi Prefecture? From the national government? (*Specific for the prefectural akiya support*)

Do your staff, including you, visit vacant houses directly? Or, do you only deal with them on paper?

Is it difficult for only 3 staff members to take charge of such a large area as Kochi Prefecture? (If so, where is the most difficult part? (*Specific for the prefectural akiya team*))

What kind of people tend to come for consultation? Are they owners of vacant houses? Are they people who want to buy a vacant house? Or, neighbors of vacant houses?

What kind of measures or challenges do you have to address the problem of vacant houses? Laws, structural damage, community reaction.

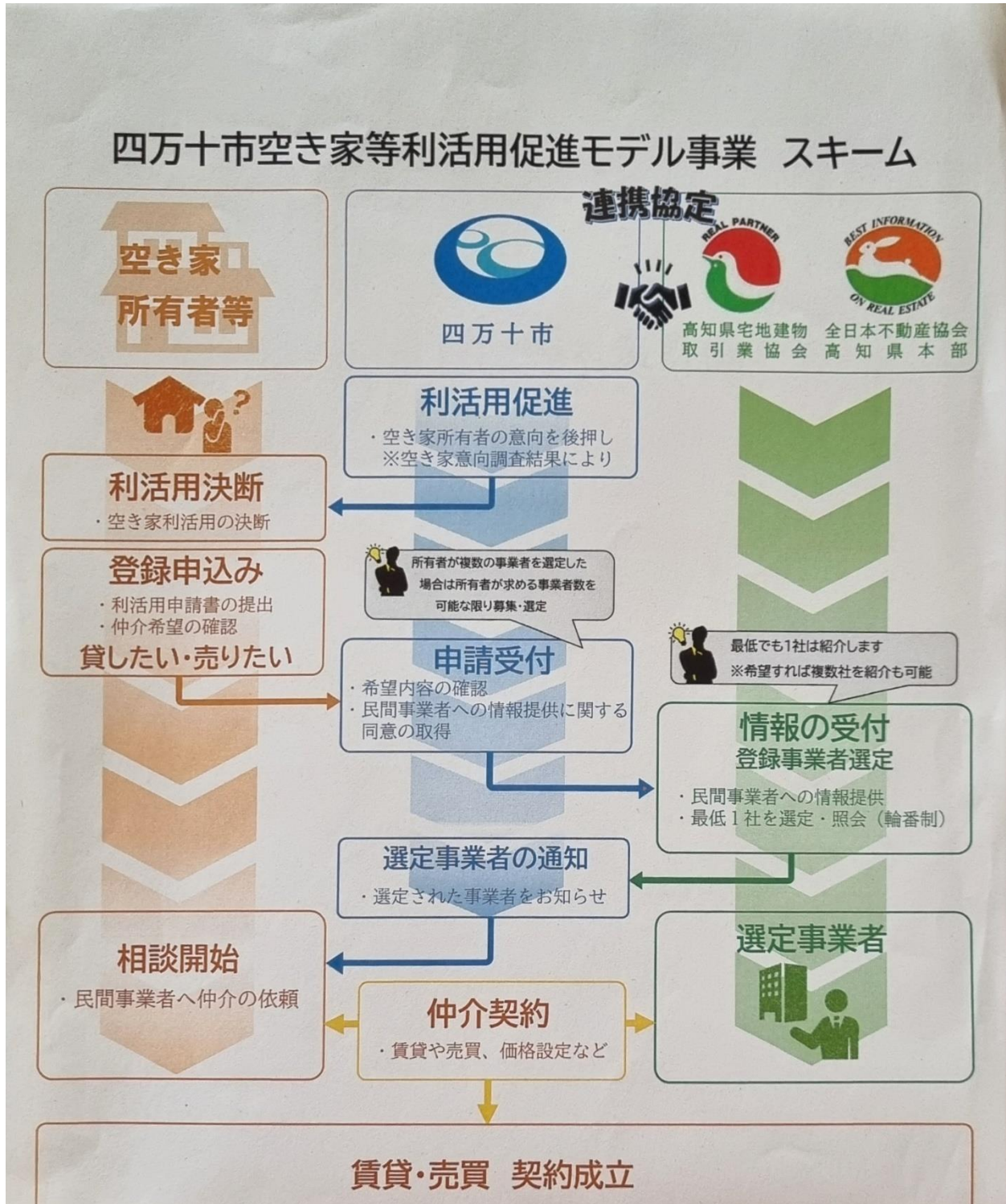
Where do you get the information that there are vacant houses?

Is there a map of vacant houses? (If not, show them a map.) In which of these areas are there many vacant houses? What are the characteristics of the area? For example, a mountainous area, or a place where there used to be a factory, etc.

If you are planning to visit a vacant house, could you take me with you? Or, could you help me contact the person who has bought a vacant house?

Personally, what do you think about the current measures taken by the municipality for vacant houses?

Also, as a personal question, could you tell me why you decided to take this position?



Appendix 6 – Front page of a town magazine from Otoyochō feat. population numbers.



Appendix 7 – Student paper written about the Fureaikan in Inabu.
“Inabu fureai salon by Team Inabu”

Many elderly women and men are sitting down talking, laughing, and drinking coffee in a small community hall. Just the other day they were playing cards, shogi, and singing karaoke. They seem to be enjoying doing these activities with their friends. This “salon”, as the event is called, is held twice a month for residents of Inabu, and anyone who wants to take part in the activities can attend this gathering for a small sum of 100 yen.

“The bell of the temple, a local community, the normal country life, traditional life lived with a family. These small communities and simple lifestyles are necessary for the creation of a sustainable region.” One of the staff of Team Inabu explained. It is an idea that Michels Robert, a political scientist from Germany called “the patriotism of the belfry”.

Team Inabu is currently one of 52 syuraku-katsudou-senta (“community activity centers”) in Kochi. The organization itself was created by the prefectural office, but it is run by residents of the region. To put it simply, these community activity centers are built in certain remote villages or areas to improve the quality of residents’ lives, and to solve local issues. The purpose of this center is maintaining and developing activities for residents, as well as making a community where everyone cooperates to have a meaningful life. The facilities used are usually a closed school in an area.

Now, Japan, especially Kochi is an aging society. The population of Kochi is now under 700,000. The number of elderly in the region is more than double in comparison to the young, and it is difficult to sustain a lifestyle in towns or villages that have only a few residents left. The situation is the direst in certain areas, most common in remote hamlets in mountainous areas, but also some towns. In Inabu the total population amounts to 1600 people, and the rate of the population being above 65 years of age is about 40 %.

Inabu is not located in the mountains, but on the plain in Nankoku city, the second largest city of Kochi prefecture. Team Inabu was first organized in 2014, and it was the first community center not located in the mountains. Usually community centers use closed down schools as locales, sometimes in addition to meeting places they can be used for accommodation, or to make local

specialties. In Inabu's case it is not located in a school, but in a community hall called "Inabu fureikan". The hall is located next to the still in use Inabu elementary school and the school and the hall have frequent shared activities, sometimes with the help of students from Kochi University. These events are opportunities for the elderly and the children to gather and talk with each other, as well as making local specialties, practicing emergency drills etc. One of the staff members of Team Inabu said; "The core of doing regional revitalization are schools".

Inabu regularly creates activities where mostly elderly residents cooperate with elementary school students and their parents through planting, radio exercises, reading picture books, and festivals for local specialty products. These activities are named PTCA. It is built on the idea of PTA (parent-teacher-association) but brings in the C for community. Team Inabu thinks the school does an important job to strengthen community ties, and base this model on the ministry of education, cultures, sports, science, and technology.

How do you think about your school? For many schools are reminiscent of good old days, and for parents it is where they send their children. To do PTCA activities, children can take part in supporting the school as well as community development continuously, even after graduation. Therefore, PTCA is an easy and effective way to involve residents of the town in regional revitalization, and it is why Team Inabu suggests that the core of regional revitalization are schools. There are about 30,000 schools in Japan, and one third of that is working on projects like these, Inabu being one of them.

Another issue that Team Inabu thinks is important is "health promotion". These days it is a big problem that elderly people go to the hospital regularly even though they are not ill. The reason for this is that the hospital is one of the few places they can meet their friends, or just someone to talk to. Inabu fureai salon helps with this issue, as twice a month people can go there and meet and talk with acquaintances. As a result, they could decrease the fee for medical treatment of Inabu by 21,500,000 yen, and the number of medical examinations also decreased with 866 examinations compared to 4 years ago. This is due to the salon, as well as other PTCA activities, and other revitalization projects. "The ultimate protective measure of requiring nursing care is connection to people."

Because of the link to the community, elderly residents can be healthy in both mind and body. From the view of social epidemiology, people who have shut themselves indoors and isolated

themselves from others tend to require nursing care. It is said that people who regularly mix with other residents of the region have a lower risk of getting dementia and have a longer life span than people who do not.

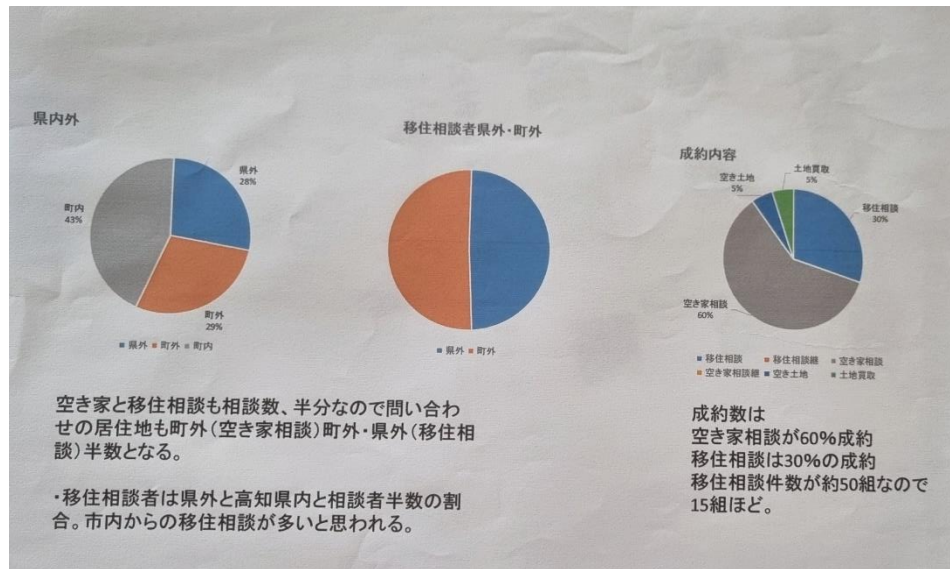
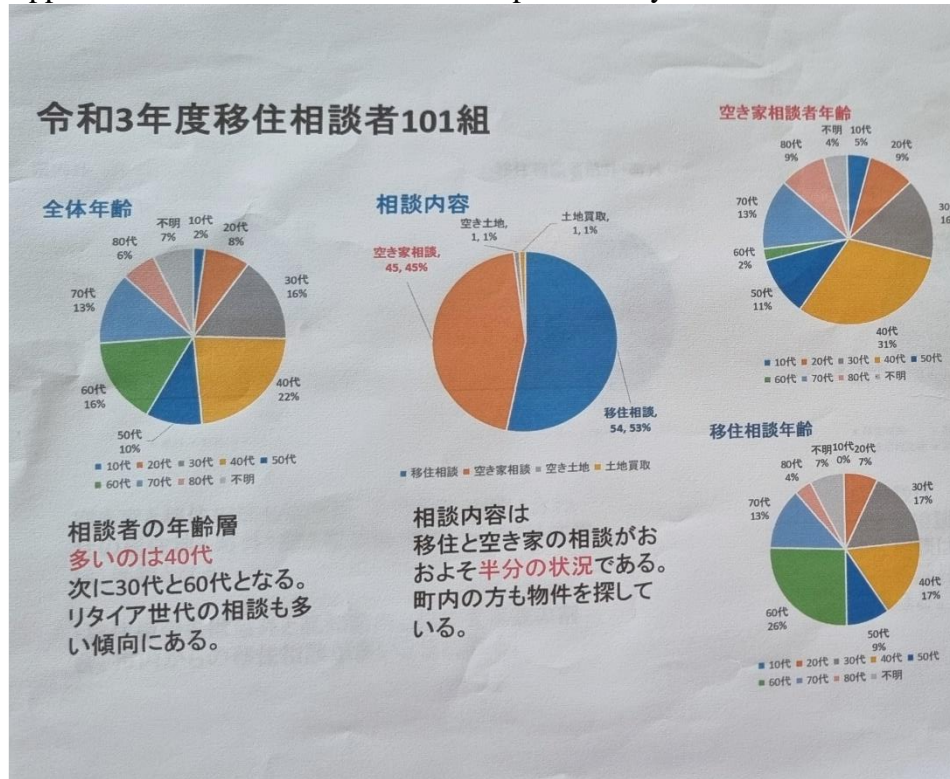
One of the staff was told by one of the women, over 80 years of age; “If the salon were held every day, there would be no need to go to the hospital.” Remembering this the staff smiled and said; “When I heard these words, I thought this is what I want to happen, and now it has come true.”

Why is decreasing fees for medical treatment necessary? It is because if these expenses decrease, the money can be used for other projects. Currently fees for medical treatment in Japan are increasing by one thousand billion yen per year. Since this money could be put to better use Team Inabu thinks these costs need to be lowered, but of course not to the cost of human life or health. But at this rate there is no money to use for new projects, such as promoting industry, and that is also why it is important to keep promoting health among the residents.

Lao Tsu was a philosopher in ancient China who taught his students that “a leader is best when people barely know he exist.” Team Inabu thinks this leader is not a person, but a method. They think that if they can make an “Inabu method”, their hope is that it could become the base of something more. If the Inabu method were to become common sense that is known to everyone, that means that there would be sustainable community development. The existence of one leader is limiting as it is too dependent on one person, but if everyone knows and practices the method, there is no need for a leader. The cooperation of the region and the school can be called “Inabuism”, and these activities with residents creates a consensus of the Inabu region. “We have almost built Inabuism, and we will keep trying hard.”

In 2022, the Inabu elementary school will have its 150th anniversary since its foundation. The current goal of Team Inabu is to reach this anniversary in good spirits.”

Appendix 8 – Document with statistics provided by Yamada in Nakatosacho



Appendix 9 – A comic strip in promotional material from Otoyocho illustrating potential challenges with rural lifestyles.



11 イラスト・マンガ：川村圭子（ぼっちり堂）