

## Fachgruppe Stadt- und Regionalforschung auf der VSJF-Tagung 2023

**Organizer:** Cornelia Reiher (FU Berlin)

### Abstracts

#### **“Living here is like studying abroad”: the image of Miyakojima as a foreign country amongst Japanese urbanite migrants**

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The Miyako Islands are best known amongst the Japanese for their bright blue sea and sugarcane fields. Moreover, over the past decade the remote islands have increasingly become a destination for urbanite migrants who hope to find alternative ways of living and working at the very edge of Japan. The majority of these migrants are relatively young, well educated, and leave their previous jobs behind for a life that is fundamentally different from what they had before. As such, migration to Miyakojima is an example of how current generations of Japanese use physical mobility as a strategy to mitigate social pressures, health threats, and uncertain career paths characteristic of life in Japanese metropolises. This paper explores one dominant narrative articulated by urbanite migrants who describe Miyakojima as “some sort of foreign country” (*kaigai mitai na basho*) within the borders of Japan. Based upon archival material, on- and offline interviews and blogs, I trace this particular image historically and explore its role in the trajectories of Japanese migrants on Miyako in the present-day. My main argument is that while Okinawa’s foreign image was institutionalized in the 1970s as part of the prefecture’s tourist campaigns, it is now a shaping factor in the lives of individuals who do not feel in place in present-day Japan.

I take Miyakojima as a case to contribute to debates on the shifting discourses about the countryside and their far-reaching consequences in Japanese Studies and beyond. Moreover, I aim to provide an alternative to popular views that understand present-day voluntary migration trends as a set of privileged lifestyle choices and rather point to the complex processes that shape the trajectories of Japanese urbanites on Miyako.

#### **Intersectionality in Japanese schools: The experiences and struggles of LGBTQ+ JET teachers in rural Japan**

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In Japan, sexual minorities have been underrepresented in topics in classrooms, and LGBTQ+ teachers and students face various difficulties in heteronormative school settings. The same can be said for LGBTQ+ teachers from overseas who work as assistant language teachers (ALTs) as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in rural Japan. Previous studies on JET teachers (e.g., McConnell 2000) have rarely discussed the issues that LGBTQ+ JET teachers face in rural communities. Some publications discuss the conflict between “locals” and “foreigners” from a dichotomous perspective, but they do not pay attention to the heterogeneity of the experiences, especially those caused by intersections of regionality, nationality, race, sexuality, and gender identities. In our presentation, we

will adapt the concept of intersectionality, which was proposed and has been developed by African American feminist scholars, and investigate the experience of LGBTQ+ JET teachers in Japan. By doing so, we aim to shed the light on minority groups that have hitherto been invisible in previous research. First, we will overview the situation of Japanese schools and teachers, including the visibility of Japanese LGBTQ+ teachers. Second, we will discuss our key concept of intersectionality and our research method. Third, we will present data from interviews with former JET teachers from an intersectional perspective. In exploring the narratives of LGBTQ+ JET teachers, we analyze intersectional experiences caused by a) regional differences (urban/rural), b) nationality (or “insider”/“outsider” and c) race, gender, and sexuality.

### **Embracing diversity in rural Japan: Exploring mobility patterns and contributions of urban migrants to rural communities in northern Kyūshū**

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Contemporary migration patterns from urban to rural areas in Japan exhibit remarkable diversity. Some migrants have lived overseas, while others have relocated multiple times within Japan. As a result, the term “urban-rural migration” and traditional categorizations such as U-turn, I-turn, or J-turn, based solely on migrants’ origin, cannot fully capture this multifaceted phenomenon. In addition, the classification of *ijū* and *teijū*, distinguishing permanent settlement from migratory movements, faces criticism from migrants themselves who perceive this distinction as arbitrary and inaccurate. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in two municipalities in northern Kyūshū, my presentation focuses on the mobility experiences of urban-rural migrants. I examine how individual life trajectories give rise to diverse settlement patterns, interactions with local communities, and contributions to rural areas. I argue that migrants’ choices, closely intertwined with their personal journeys, significantly influence the rural landscape and foster diversity. This paper underscores the transformative potential of internal migration while illustrating its practical implications for rural revitalization. By focusing on migrants’ self-perceptions and life trajectories, I deconstruct the existing terminology of internal migration in Japan and offer a novel approach to studying these mobility patterns.