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Japan's Younger Generations Look for a New Way of Living

SUSANNE KLIEN

In March 2021, a month after he was forced to resign as chief of the Tokyo Summer Olympics, having caused outrage by blaming women for making meetings last too long, Yoshiro Mori committed another sexist gaffe. He asserted that a female political staffer was “too old to be called a woman.” Mori’s persistence in making misogynist remarks, even in the wake of the initial controversy that forced his ouster, was just one more illustration of the deeply androcentric culture in which Japanese society and politics are embedded.

Objectification of women is prevalent and rarely questioned: their external appearance is a regular subject of commentary in Japanese daily life and in the media. Television shows typically feature cute young women and elderly male commentators. Tokyo subways are adorned with advertisements for armpit and leg hair removal products for women. In the workplace, women are expected to be immaculately made up, and to wear skirts and heels in more conservative institutions. Corporate manuals with detailed descriptions of appropriate clothing and etiquette are handed out to new employees.

Women have been hit hard by the pandemic in Japan. A majority of working women are in precarious, part-time jobs, particularly in service-sector businesses such as restaurants and hotels. According to the Statistics Bureau of the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the unemployment rate increased from 2.4 percent in February 2020 to 3.0 percent in December 2020. The Single Mothers Forum found that 59

percent of single mothers had faced falling incomes during the pandemic. Queues of needy people in Tokyo seeking free meals have reached unprecedented lengths.

According to the Japanese Welfare Ministry, 21,081 people took their own lives in 2020, a 4.5 percent increase from the previous year. The suicide rate for women under 40 rose by 25 percent, and the number of suicides among high school students doubled.

In a country where mental health issues continue to be stigmatized and most people are reluctant to seek professional psychiatric help, the double punch of economic pressure and social isolation during the pandemic has been especially challenging for women. The scant support provided by the government has done little to address this situation. By late 2020, a one-time subsidy of 50,000 yen (less than \$500) to single parents had been approved, but no regular financial support has been provided for those in the kinds of precarious, irregular work in which many single mothers engage.

Media representations, political gaffes, and a lack of financial support for single mothers all stem from the tendency for key stakeholders in Japan to be male and relatively old. In their eyes, a woman’s principal task is to help boost Japan’s rapidly decreasing population. At its most extreme, this attitude tends to regard single mothers as having failed in their role of keeping up harmony in the household through endurance (*gaman*).

Despite increasing signs that this long-ingrained, systematized patriarchy may not serve Japan well, the island nation on many fronts has been reluctant to embrace change. Even as the pandemic entered its second year, corporate workers continued to commute to offices in packed

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trains despite low levels of testing for the coronavirus and a vaccination rate far behind those of most other advanced nations. As of mid-June 2021, a mere 7.8 percent of Japan's total population had received at least one dose of the vaccine, compared with 43 percent in the United States. Despite the slow vaccination rollout, the government insisted on proceeding with the Olympics, heedless of strong public opposition.

OUTWARD BOUND

The other side of the coin is that an increasing number of younger Japanese adults, disenchanted with traditional norms, have relocated to rural Japan or overseas, or have started to consider such a move. Here are the stories of some characteristic cases I have interviewed in recent months.

Eri, a 27-year-old artist, has never considered Japan to be a place where she wishes to spend much time. She associates her home country with excessively rigid social norms, and she has had numerous encounters with stalkers. She is a *kikoku shijo*—a returnee—that is, someone who is Japanese, but has lived overseas and is thus categorized as different from “normal” Japanese. Having spent her teens in Europe, she is now completing her master's studies in Canada and is planning to move to China with her partner.

Sayaka, 35, relocated to Europe eight years ago. She concedes that in many ways, her life is not so different from when she was living in Japan. Most of her friends are Japanese or have ties to the Japanese community. She does business with Japanese companies as a freelancer, and reads Japanese books and news online. Yet she also emphasizes that her move has expanded her critical thinking skills considerably, and she is not planning to return to her home country. Perhaps most importantly, Sayaka says she has learned to value her own well-being and happiness, and has come to reject the notion that she must function as a cog in the workplace and society. For her, the key motivation to move abroad was her realization that as a dropout from a vocational school, she had little chance to find a career in a country that prioritizes degrees over performance.

Ryu, 43, is an information technology engineer who relocated to Europe two years ago with his wife and two children. Asked about his motives for the move, he says that Japan, with its lack of

diversity, does not seem to be a country that holds much hope for his children. With a chuckle, he adds that he is now doing most of the cooking and housework since he works at home and manages to keep his average work time to some three hours a day. Ryu enjoys preparing well-balanced, nutritious meals for his family, and he observes that this rearrangement of domestic duties means more time for his wife to play with their kids. In his view, this has contributed positively to the well-being of all family members. Back in Tokyo, when he was working long hours as a salaried employee, he hardly spent any time at home, and had no energy left to help with domestic duties.

In a similar vein, Saori, who is in their early thirties and describes herself as third-gender and nonbinary, also now lives in Europe after working in many other places around the world as a programmer, web and app developer, and IT consultant. Despite their qualifications, they could not apply for a secure, permanent corporate job in Japan because they are a member of a sexual minority. On job applications, candidates must

check a box for their sex, with no option other than male or female. This binary pressure also applies to social life beyond work: Saori remembers that on many occasions, friends and coworkers

in Japan urged them to avoid any ambiguities with regard to their gender choices, appearance, and behavior in daily life.

On a positive note, on March 17, 2021, the Sapporo District Court issued the country's first judicial ruling that affirmed the legality of same-sex marriage and found that previous refusals by the Japanese government to accept such marriages were unconstitutional. While this constitutes a landmark ruling, the reality is that coming out as gay or lesbian can be difficult in Japan. Many people lead double lives to avoid social stigma, and gay clubs are known only to those in the scene.

RURAL RETREATS

Among Japanese who are relatively young and can engage in remote work, the pandemic has sparked a renewed interest in moving to rural areas. Data released in October 2020 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications indicated that for the fourth month in a row, more people had left Tokyo than had moved to the

Flight from cities is part of a larger paradigm shift.

capital. Departures from Tokyo had increased by 10.6 percent compared with the year before. Some major companies like Fujitsu and Panasonic have started offering the option of moving staff to rural areas, decreasing office costs and promoting more flexible modes of work.

Rural moves have been gradually increasing since the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Chances are that the ongoing pandemic will further enhance the appeal of rural life, especially in regions that offer the benefits of country living within easy reach of larger urban areas. In a way, the recent increase in rural relocations is not only about moving from one place to another. It also reflects a larger paradigm shift in modes of work as well as the constraints of an urban culture that revolves around an anthropocentric, consumerist lifestyle.

Rena, 32, has chosen to settle in a town with 5,000 residents in the mountains of a sparsely populated prefecture in western Japan. She had spent two years in Bangladesh working in international development and could not envision returning to Tokyo. Rural life seemed more in sync with her experience overseas, where social relations were deemed more important than work and income. She chose a rural area that offers multifaceted inspirations, not just idyllic nature. She was impressed by the contemporary feel of the town's official homepage, especially in comparison with other towns.

In fact, the town has seen an increase not only in new settlers from within Japan, but also foreigners. Locals can now enjoy craft beer brewed by an Irishman and peanut butter cookies made with a Californian touch by an IT entrepreneur who relocated from the United States with his Japanese wife. A few steps away, a British artist has opened a studio with his Japanese artist wife. Despite the small number of residents, there is a cosmopolitan feel to the town.

Newcomers to rural areas also include Japanese returning from overseas. For example, a remote hamlet near Rena's town recently welcomed a couple in their mid-forties who had lived in Europe for more than ten years. They are entrepreneurs in high-end garment making and say they are greatly satisfied with their new environment, where they can work at their own pace, rent is affordable, and their products can be shipped easily to customers across Japan.

Two years ago, Rena opened a guesthouse and offers classes in making Bangladeshi curry with

freshly harvested local vegetables. She enjoys living in a spacious house and has a wide social network, as well as time to herself. She renovated the old wooden house with friends to keep down costs. "My way to go about things may be low risk, low return," she laughs, sitting on her comfortable porch with a picture-postcard view of the mountain, valley, river, and forest stretching out below as birds sing in the background.

I think that life should be fun, above everything. Otherwise, it's just too stressful. Having fun, helping others, and not suffering are the main things needed to achieve a balanced life, in my opinion. Personally, it makes me happy if I can see the faces of people I work for rather than sitting in some office every day.

As tourism came to a halt with the onset of the pandemic, Rena worried about her livelihood. But her relations with the tightly knit local community saved her. Neighbors and friends helped her find part-time jobs to pay her bills.

By the spring of 2021, Rena's guesthouse was buzzing with visitors from across Japan. During Golden Week, a five-day holiday in May, her guesthouse had visitors from Tokyo and Osaka, including a British family with two children and a young British couple. She plans to work hard to host even more guests in the future, but she also aims to enjoy herself. In addition to the guesthouse, Rena takes on multiple jobs to boost her income, including farming, cleaning, writing, and looking after children.

ENTREPRENEURIAL INFLUX

An increasing number of visitors have recently come to the small town and Rena's guesthouse seeking information about rural life and a permanent place to live. The town has welcomed other female entrepreneurs drawn to rural Japan by low rents and living costs.

Yuki, now in her mid-forties, worked as a pastry chef in Tokyo before deciding to move back to her home prefecture. She has opened her own pastry shop in the house where she lives with her four cats. The shop is open only on Saturdays and Sundays, because the high-quality chamomile panna cotta and cookies that she makes by hand with free-range eggs take a lot of time to prepare. The garden in front of her shop is full of chamomile flowers—foraging is part of her business.

A local shop owner a few steps away observes that the influx of such innovative entrepreneurs is

a huge gain for the aging and depopulated community. Locals tend to think that setting up a shop involves high costs, but newcomers compensate for their lack of financial resources with creative ideas. For now, Yuki's small shop seems successful: by lunchtime, some of her products are sold out. Her sweets are also on sale in the local tourist shop in the town center, where plenty of visitors stop by on weekends.

Taku, 31, moved to a remote island in western Japan four years ago. During his university studies, Taku lived in Russia for a year, an experience that left him keenly interested in international careers. After graduating from his elite university, he joined a well-known company with foreign branch offices. However, overseas work turned out to involve less interaction with locals than he had anticipated. He eventually quit his job and applied for a position as a regional revitalization officer on the island where he now lives.

Taku's initial aim was to use his relocation as a starting point to acquire more skills, with the ultimate goal of relocating overseas and starting an entrepreneurial venture.

Three years ago, when I first met him, he was not very enthusiastic about island life. He missed chance encounters at bars and cafes, intellectual and cultural stimulation, and overall urban vibes. When I talked to him again in the fall of 2020, he seemed much happier. He was highly satisfied with his new job as a food coordinator, in charge of organizing the day-to-day management of an educational program that brings chefs from across Japan together with local youth who aspire to be chefs. He talked about the deep inspiration he gets from being surrounded by nature and eating freshly harvested food and fish just out of the sea. He still thinks about his plans to move overseas in the future, but for the time being he intends to stay on the island.

Taku enjoys the fact that his work is highly self-determined, in sharp contrast to his corporate job back in Tokyo. He earned much more in the capital, but he says that his standard of living on the island is much higher. Handmade tofu and fresh fish and vegetables are hard to find in Tokyo, no matter how much you pay, he says.

Like Rena, one of the things Taku greatly appreciates about rural life is time to himself. The other day, he posted a picture of a cloud on the

coast. "Running after a cloud is something that I could never have done back in Tokyo," he said. "It gives me huge satisfaction that I can do this occasionally when I feel like it."

WORK-LIFE REBALANCE

Many Japanese millennials I have interviewed over the years have observed that rather than following instructions and engaging in routine tasks, they are more comfortable with carving out their own work on their own terms.

Eri, 27, is one of them, working two part-time jobs. She puts in three days a week as an administrative assistant in the local government office of the rural town where she moved six years ago, after graduating from a university in the greater Tokyo area. On weekends, she works in a coffee roastery set up by another newcomer. Until a year ago, she worked for a company that delivers lunch boxes to senior citizens in the area, a job that turned out to be too stressful and exhausting.

Eri's husband, who is originally from Osaka, holds a well-paid IT job but has to work long hours, often on weekends.

Eri dreams of selling a variety of self-made specialties from a food truck, but she has not gotten around to starting the procedures to apply for permission. She concedes that after her last job in food delivery, she is not too eager to go back to a full-time job soon and is thinking of ways to get by without working at all. For now, she enjoys making syrups and boiled dumplings with fresh, local ingredients in her free time.

As these vignettes indicate, Japan's millennials have different career and life goals than previous generations. They aspire to have a (relatively) slow but personally meaningful life, a network of friends, good food, and, last but not least, time for themselves. With its rigid rules of seniority and etiquette, corporate employment in Japan no longer seems to be an attractive option for them.

HIGH-FUNCTIONING HIKIKOMORI

Another group that has little interest in corporate employment consists of youth who live in social isolation, known as *hikikomori*. They have drawn a lot of attention and concern as a social trend in Japan over the past few years, viewed as a symptom of alienation and anomie in a society where individuals seem less and less keen on

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interpersonal interaction and communication. More than 70 percent of hikikomori are male. They tend to spend much of their time at home, in their rooms, surfing the Internet, watching TV, playing games, reading books, newspapers, and manga, listening to the radio, and sleeping.

The most common reasons for their withdrawal are job loss or discomfort at work, social anxiety, and illness. Although they are perceived as a niche group, government sources estimate that approximately one million people fall into this social category in Japan. Most of these social recluses are in their twenties and thirties, but there is a growing group of hikikomori in their forties. The majority live in their parents' houses due to lack of financial means. They may be seen as irresponsible, avoidant, or at worst, societal failures.

However, not all is doom and gloom. Recently, examples of individuals who are socially withdrawn yet successful have come to light. Nito Souji, for example, has lived a socially hikikomori life for ten years. But he is an indie game developer who is well known for *Pull Stay*, a game released in 2020, and shares glimpses of his daily life on YouTube. In contrast to stereotypes about social recluses, Nito works every day at home on his game development and marketing, and may have more drive than the average corporate warrior.

Increasingly, writers who may not strictly fall into the category of hikikomori but lead relatively reclusive lives have gained prominence in the Japanese book market. Ohara Henri has authored the books *Living a Happy Life with an Annual Income of 900,000 Yen* and *Seclusion in One's Twenties: How to Live a Comfortable Life with Five Free Days a Week*. Having started seclusion—or as he calls it, “retirement”—at the age of 25, his most recent move was to Taipei. Living mostly on vegetables, tofu, and fresh fruit, Ohara has chosen a lifestyle that reduces his overall cost of living and allows him to spend most of his time pursuing his pastimes of taking walks, thinking, and reading.

Another emerging author is Tetsu Kayama, whose two volumes of manga, *Berlin Uwa No Sora* (Sky Over Berlin), have been highly popular. Depicting his daily life in Berlin, Kayama manages to portray small episodes of happiness with subtle humor. He offers a transnational take on subjective well-being, negotiating his identity between Japanese norms, German standards, and other expatriates' approaches to daily life: going to the supermarket to shop for food, venturing into a café

for a cup of coffee and some diversion from work at home, setting up projects with friends to support the needy. The scenes in Kayama's manga may seem quotidian, but they raise important social issues and give a sense of the place and its diverse residents.

SEEKING SELF-DETERMINATION

What do Japanese people who relocate to rural areas or overseas, classic social introverts, and Nito Souji and other artists and authors have in common? They all seek ways to escape postwar Japan's corporate culture and shift their focus to subjective well-being, a slower pace of life, more social engagement (if not necessarily of a face-to-face nature), and more self-determination.

Youth both inside and outside of Japan are withdrawing in diverse ways that make sense to them, and this may not necessarily be a negative thing. Given its conspicuous demographic trend, with a rapidly aging population and diminishing labor force, Japan is clearly in a transitional post-growth phase—and people are aspiring to new modes of living and (not) working, or working less.

The ongoing pandemic has highlighted the increasing gaps between social strata. As life in the metropolis seemed less and less attractive, given that entertainment and leisure pursuits always came with the risk of infection, those with education and white-collar jobs began to consider moving to less densely populated areas. As classes went online, innovative university students temporarily relocated to remote, rural areas, using such stays to gather hands-on experience in start-ups. Even government circles have started to use the term “workation,” a combination of work and vacation, to try to entice corporate employees to work in rural areas for limited periods of time. The Japan Tourism Agency has allocated 5 billion yen (more than \$45 million) in its 2021 budget to implement workation-related activities, hoping to boost the stagnating tourism industry.

Lifestyle magazines feature small towns across Japan with newly opened designer cafes, sleek boutiques, and hip restaurants with minimalist interiors, run by young or middle-aged ex-urbanites. Some cautiously pursue lifestyles in two places, commuting between Tokyo and a rural area within easy reach. Books on rural relocation with titles such as *Leave Tokyo Behind: The Reality of Rural Moves During the Pandemic* and *How Not to Get Murdered When Living in the Countryside* are recent bestsellers in Japan.

These anecdotes cover a multiplicity of contexts, but all point to increasingly conspicuous gaps between governmental, corporate, and individual notions of how everyday life and work should be organized. The postwar idea of the salaried worker being supported by the full-time housewife seems to persist in the media and in many Japanese minds, yet fewer people embrace this option. Post-familial lifestyle options are on the rise, as more millennials choose to live in collective housing or frequently use co-working spaces; others move overseas in a quest for more fulfilling and diverse choices in areas ranging from education to self-growth, gender diversity, or (reduced) work. These trends suggest new possibilities for Japan's future society, even if hope and despair are intricately intermingled.

In May 2020, Kimura Hana, a professional wrestler in her early twenties, committed suicide after suffering malicious cyberbullying in reaction to her role in the popular reality TV series *Terrace House*. This incident once again revealed the heavy toll that the male-dominated media industry takes on female professionals. One man has been held criminally liable but faced only token charges.

The case of journalist Ito Shiori has shaped the anti-sexual harassment and abuse “Me Too” movement in Japan, giving rise to a “We Too” wing that aims to prevent reprisals against individual accusers. In 2015, Ito claimed that she had been sedated and raped by an older, well-known male journalist

in a hotel room after a business meeting. Her colleague, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's biographer, denied all her accusations.

Ito eventually won a civil court case, was awarded damages, and was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2020. Her landmark case has broken the silence on rape in Japan and challenged an anachronistic legal system that has not been reformed for a century. Yet Ito has been widely criticized for speaking out, not least by many women in Japan. She has been subjected to extensive cyberbullying and now lives in Britain.

Despite the difficulty of pushing for reform of gender roles in a traditionalist society, such efforts gain momentum from being part of a wider generational shift that is increasingly evident across Japan. Various trajectories reflect an increasing individualization of modes of working and living among younger Japanese: female entrepreneurs in rural areas, social introverts in Japan and beyond, more people relocating overseas for educational or other reasons. They all seek more diverse ways of living that make sense to them—and in most cases, that also allow them to still make a contribution to society. These narratives highlight the stark inadequacies of the corporate and governmental establishment in Japan, yet also provide glimmers of hope for a more diverse Japan to come—in the not-too-distant future. ■