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“You‘ll never walk alone?” The meaning of social relations and belonging for happiness in rural Japan

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Wolfram Manzenreiter

Thursday
2024-10-31
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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For more than half a century, research on rural Japan has been casted by the doomsday discourse on the devastating regional effects of out-migration, infrastructure decay and population aging (*kaso chiiki*). The negative assessment has been aggravated by newer key notions of ‘marginal settlements’ (*genkai shūraku*) and the ‘extinction of communities’ (*chiiki shōmetsu*). Cities, by contrast, are said to be better prepared for the future due to the spatial concentration of institutions and resources that enable urban places to excel over the countryside in terms of labor and employment opportunities, social welfare, health care, education and entertainment. But there is no evidence that the general trend toward urbanization is paralleled by an overall increase in happiness: “There are many benefits of big-city living; high levels of happiness are not among them” (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011: 872).

Wolfram Manzenreiter’s research on rural life in Japan challenges the master-narrative of rural decline by engaging in ethnographic fashion with local notions of happiness and the significance of social relatedness for making life worth-living to those who stayed (behind) or moved into the countryside. His approach is situated in the tradition of the Vienna School of Japanese Studies, evidently by revisiting the same research site in southwestern Japan that Josef Kreiner and other researchers from Vienna chose in the late 1960s for the first time-ever field research project in Japan by a European research team. Drawing back on lessons from the first and the current project, he adopts a long-term perspective to explore the notions of rural happiness in the light of changing family and social relations, new mobilities and shifting moralities.



Wolfram Manzenreiter

is Professor of Japanese Studies at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna and Head of the Japan research unit. His research is concerned with social and anthropological aspects of sports, emotions, work and migration in a globalising world. He is author of several books and numerous articles and book chapters on cultural globalization, body culture, transnationalism and well-being. His most recent publications include *Japan through the lens of the Tokyo Olympics* (2020; co-editors I. Gagne, B. Holthus, F. Waldenberger); *Life course, happiness and well-being in Japan and Happiness and the good life in Japan* (both 2017 and coedited with B. Holthus). Currently he is working on community happiness in Japan’s rural peripheries.

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