

How Do Out-Migrants Relate to Their Place of Origin? —A Case Study of Hino-Town, Tottori Prefecture—

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1. Introduction

In Japan's rural and mountainous areas, population aging and depopulation are progressing more rapidly than in urban areas. As a consequence, many rural communities are facing tangible challenges, including increase in abandoned cultivated land and the discontinuation of local events. In response to the shortage of people capable of sustaining community activities in these areas, increasing attention has been directed toward the utilization of human resources from outside the community.

Since the late 2010s, the concept of "Kankeijinko"¹⁾ has been articulated to describe people who engage with a region in diverse ways while living elsewhere. Through initiatives such as projects aimed at creating and expanding Kankeijinko and the "Chiiki-okoshi Kyōryokutai"²⁾ program, efforts to foster potential local supporters have intensified. Kankeijinko is used multi-laterally across several government ministries, and its definition is not uniform. In academic discussions, for example, it has been defined as "urban residents who have an interest in and engage with rural areas" (Odagiri, 2018), "people who consciously maintain and practice relationships between rural regions and large cities" (Hirai, 2020), and "outsiders who maintain continuous interest and involvement in a specific region" (Tanaka, 2021).

As aging continues among households in rural and mountainous communities, understanding how these communities connect with human resources from outside the region is essential for considering the future sustainability of rural areas.

2. Growing Expectations for Out-Migrants as Regional Human Resources

Among those who engage in community activities from outside the region as part of the related population, it has been noted that there are broadly two types: those who have territorial or kinship ties to the community and those who do not (Kobayashi & Nakatsuka, 2024). Within the former group, individuals who were born and raised in the community but have since moved away while leaving their parental households behind are referred to as out-migrants.

Although out-migrants have traditionally been viewed negatively as individuals who left their hometowns, interest in them has grown in recent years, as they are now regarded as a valuable demographic for sustaining rural communities (Noda, 2022). People originally from rural areas who have migrated to urban regions have been referred to in prior studies by various terms. In this paper, all such terms are treated synonymously under out-migrants.

Previous research has shown that the presence of farmland plays a significant role in maintaining interpersonal ties between elderly households and their out-migrant family members, regardless of land ownership scale (Yamamoto et al., 1998), and that support provided by out-migrants contributes to sustaining the daily lives of elderly residents in rural areas (Ajisaka, 2011; Akiba, 2010). It has also been pointed out that understanding both the future trajectories of families including out-migrants and their ongoing support relationships with parental homes is important when considering the maintenance and continuity of settlements (Tokuno & Kasio, 2014).

Nevertheless, out-migrants are not a panacea for sustaining rural communities. For example, there are cases in which the operation of local festivals is made sustainable only because resident inhabitants bear roles that cannot be fulfilled solely by out-migrants (Okubo et al., 2011). Furthermore, when a large proportion of neighborhood association officers are out-migrants, several challenges may emerge, including a shortage of officers who can respond immediately in the event of disasters and the loss or dilution of community information before it reaches out-migrants (Kobayashi & Nakatsuka, 2024).

Even so, out-migrants constitute an indispensable human resource for sustaining rural communities and regional assets, including farmland. To jointly sustain their hometowns, it is crucial for communities and out-migrants to foster a well-balanced relationship in which neither side overextends itself.

3. Differences in Regional Perceptions between Out-Migrants and Residents

To facilitate discussion on building such a moderately balanced relationship, it is important to visualize the thoughts and attitudes that both community residents and out-migrants hold toward maintaining local society and regional resources. This paper presents part of the results of a questionnaire survey conducted in cooperation with the municipal government of Hino-Town, Tottori Prefecture.

1) Survey Method

The survey was conducted on July 20, 2024, during the Neu Festival held in Hino-Town. Approximately 1,500 people attended the festival, and 130 responses were collected, of which 126 were valid. Subjective evaluations of regional consciousness were measured using 12 items from the short version of the Community Consciousness Scale (Ishimori et al., 2013).

2) Results of Analysis

Regarding age distribution, respondents in their teens and twenties accounted for 30%, those in their thirties and forties for 43%, those in their fifties and sixties for 23%, and those in their seventies and eighties for 3%. Women accounted for 51% of respondents. Half of the respondents resided in Hino-Town, while 23% were out-migrants.

Factor analysis revealed three factors: Solidarity-Based Self-Determination, Delegation to Others, and Administrative Involvement (Hori et al., 2024). Further analysis indicated that only the Solidarity-Based Self-Determination factor showed a significant difference between residents and out-migrants. Specifically, even among those not residing in Hino-Town, individuals who were originally from Hino-Town exhibited a strong sense of solidarity-based self-determination toward their place of origin.

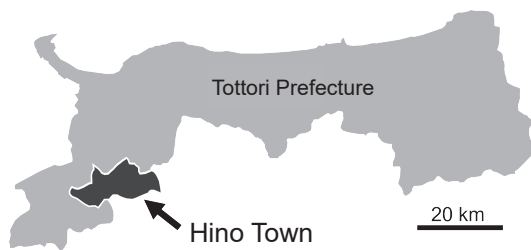
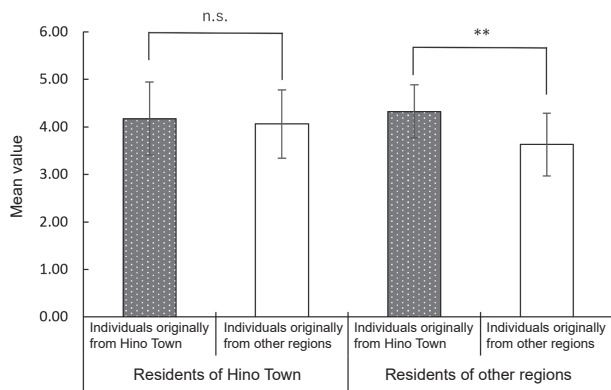


Figure 1. Location of Hino-Town in Tottori Prefecture



** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Figure 2. Results of analysis of variance for the subscale score "Solidarity-Based Self-Determination"

4. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

This study examined differences in community consciousness between out-migrants and residents of Hino-Town. The findings suggest that strengthening systems that allow people to feel solidarity with their place of origin and participate in local decision-making from outside the region may expand opportunities for out-migrants to engage more actively with their hometowns.

In 2024, ten years will have passed since the enactment of the Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy Act. However, nationwide surveys indicate that many local governments continue to identify population decline, labor shortages, and a lack of successors as critical challenges (Cabinet Secretariat, 2024).

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the residents of Hino-Town and to all respondents who cooperated in this research. Future research will continue to explore the factors necessary for building well-balanced relationships between local communities and out-migrants through fieldwork, including interviews.

Note:

- 1) "kankeijinkō" a term referring to individuals who maintain connections with a community without residing there permanently
- 2) "Chiiki-okoshi Kyōryokutai" (Community Revitalization Cooperation Team) is a national program in Japan that dispatches urban residents to rural areas to support community development and revitalization efforts. Participants typically engage in local promotion, tourism, agriculture, or other regional projects

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