

The *Akiya* Phenomenon, Revitalisation, and Resistance: Investigating Vacant Houses as a Tool for Repopulation in Rural Japan

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Vacant houses will save Kochi. Of course, they will not 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 (good health or in this case, revitalisation).¹

- Written at the top of the Kochi prefecture akiya portal site.
<https://akiya-kochi.jp/>. (Accessed: 2023-10-06)

There is no doubt abandoned houses capture the imagination. We all have memories of them from some point in our childhood, whether as a spooky mansion in a cartoon, or the house with the rusty fence you walk past just a little bit faster on your way home. They tend to have an eerie quality. Empty dwellings, once capable of hosting the warmth and life of a family become nothing more than deteriorating structures, serving as silent reminders of a time gone by. A time which, in the case of Japan, held greater economic opportunity.

In Japan, a country struggling with a continuously shrinking population combined with widespread rural depopulation, the phenomenon of *akiya* (vacant houses) has recently received much media attention in the international press (Cozier, 2023; Hornyak, 2023; McElhinney, 2023; Petersson & Härdelin, 2024). While the exclusion of millennials

¹ All translations in this essay were made by the author.

from the housing market is a common complaint in the West, Japan seems to be giving houses away for practically nothing. According to the latest figures from the Housing and Land Survey conducted in 2018, an incredible 13.6 % of all houses in Japan were vacant (Housing and Land Survey, 2018), and researchers have estimated that number might climb to as high as 30.2% by 2033 (Oda et al., 2018: 1074). Bleak numbers for owners of *akiya* and people living in depopulated neighbourhoods alike, but as seen in the quote above it might be possible to see them as an asset in the fight against depopulation. Kochi prefecture, a place where the *akiya* problem is particularly pronounced, is trying to do just that.

Kochi prefecture is located on Shikoku Island, far from the administrative and economic centres of Japan. While the national average of *akiya* is 13.6%, Kochi has already reached 18.6%, making it one of the most heavily affected. Unfortunately, a majority of these *akiya* are not listed for sale nor rent, it is often uncertain who actually owns the property, and many houses are in a too derelict state to be lived in. This leads to an interesting contradiction. Even as houses are increasingly left vacant, the prefectural office claims there is actually a shortage of available housing. According to the Kochi *akiya* portal site, every year over 200 households looking to relocate to the prefecture end up giving up due to a lack of suitable housing.² Therefore, the *akiya* countermeasure team in Kochi want to change the narrative around *akiya*. They propose to reframe them from expensive burden to a potentially powerful tool in the fight against depopulation. This

stance is perhaps illustrated best in the quote at the beginning of this essay, placed on the homepage of the portal site. The houses, a clear consequence of depopulation, are colourfully described as potential saviours of Kochi prefecture, but as I will show, there might be opposition from an unexpected place. That is from the community itself, the very people deemed in need of saving.

In this essay, I build on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Kochi prefecture from February to April 2023, during which I conducted interviews with people working with the *akiya* problem, and with local residents living in areas with *akiya*. The majority of the local residents were elderly people who had lived in the area all their lives. By using the *akiya* problem as a lens, I discovered a tension between official and local perceptions of *akiya*, and more importantly, tensions in the interplay between local residents and prospective migrants. I begin this essay by outlining Kochi's official narrative that focuses on transforming the debates around *akiya*, while facing challenges with identifying the houses, not to mention making them available for sale or rent. Secondly, I turn to the attitude of local residents towards efforts to repopulate their region and discuss perceptions of a generational gap exacerbating already existing cultural differences between urban and rural populations. Thirdly, I focus on processes of resistance against repopulation at any cost, where local residents are shown to be hesitant to accept newcomers purely for the sake of repopulation. Finally, I argue that even though the solution to a depopulated countryside

² <https://akiyakochi.jp/>

naturally seems to be encouraging migration, this might not be as clear-cut as it seems. Sometimes, it might even be against the wishes of the local population. This study has shown that by studying the efforts to repopulate rural Japan we can unveil a rich and complex web of belonging, tradition, and self-preservation, revealing that there are things of more value to residents than the uncompromising repopulation of their neighbourhoods.

Shifting the Narrative

There are many factors that make solving the *akiya* problem a complicated endeavour. *Akiya* owners, who often reside far from the actual property, face high costs due to property taxes, and must struggle with inheritance laws and bureaucratic hurdles, regardless of if they want to keep or sell the house. The houses can also constitute a danger to their environment if they become structurally unsound and are often an eyesore to neighbours, but demolition is discouraged not only by the mere cost of demolition, but by the fact that unbuilt land is taxed at a higher rate than built land.

Additionally, as the prices of *akiya* are incredibly low, few real estate agents are willing to work with them, a fact that has spurred the creation of several websites aiming to connect sellers with buyers. Municipalities usually have so-called *akiya* banks, websites where sellers can post their property without cost, and some prefectures have created websites pooling information from municipal websites to create larger databases. On the website *Minna no 0 yen bukken* (everyone's 0 yen property) houses are even listed for free. It is easy to understand that *akiya* are considered a burden on society.

As stated above, the prefectural government in Kochi is trying to reshape the discussion on *akiya* to consider them in a more positive light—as an aid in fighting depopulation. The catch phrase “*Akiya* will save Kochi” is used frequently in promotional videos and other promotional materials. However, it became clear in my interviews that even with this

influx of online tools, many municipalities struggle with identifying available properties and locating owners, and often end up working on a case-by-case basis. Meaning that it is only when a prospective migrant has been identified that the search for a suitable house begins, rendering the process ineffective and time-consuming.

In 2022, as part of a renewed effort to tackle the *akiya* problem, the prefectural office took over an already existing *akiya* support hotline (*akiya sōdan madoguchi*) in Kochi city. It is currently run by two people, an expert in restoration of old houses and his apprentice daughter. It functions as a direct line for owners of *akiya* to call or email to get help in evaluating, renovating, and finally selling or renting their house. In an interview they told me that in two years they received around 500 requests to help with *akiya*, but due to the long process from initial contact to finished house, and there only being the two of them, they had only been able to help with 70 cases. In relation to this they highlighted how problematic the time constraints were as houses that are left to deteriorate might turn from DIY renovation object to unliveable in only one year, mainly due to the humid climate, and many of the *akiya* in Kochi are unsuitable for immediate use. Unfortunately, the process of giving an *akiya* its “second story”, as it is painted in the quote, is both highly time-sensitive and labour-intensive.

Despite these difficulties the two hotline workers, as well as their prefectural partners at the *akiya* countermeasure team, were optimistic about the future of *akiya* in Kochi. During my fieldwork I spoke to city hall employees in six other municipalities around Kochi prefecture as well, and although they all admit to fighting an uphill battle, they also remained firmly optimistic about the prospects of *akiya* and repopulation, true to the narrative. They told me they believe that if houses, schools, and jobs are available, people will come back. Only one official confessed that she sometimes feared that her town, in the mountainous northeastern part of Kochi, one day would disappear. Her town is one of

the most heavily affected by depopulation and population aging, and her confession reflects the focal point of the coming sections, the sentiments of local residents.

Clashing Ideas and Ideals in Local Communities

During my fieldwork I asked my interviewees to draw me maps of their communities in order to visualise the physical reality of living in *akiya*-heavy areas. It was clear that they had intimate knowledge of each and every structure in their neighbourhood. They could tell me not only which houses were vacant, but when and why it had become that way. Most of the time they also knew who stood to inherit, or had already inherited the house, and if they thought they would return to their home village. Most of the time, they did not think the inheritor would return. The story was a common one, due to job availability the family had established themselves in the Tokyo greater metropolitan area and would not be returning. The underlying message is that there is not enough to incentivise a return to the home village. They have resigned themselves to the fact that their region cannot offer enough desirable opportunities for the younger generation to stay, nor come back.

This sentiment is understandable, especially considering that Kochi's population peaked as early as the late 1950s (Kochi prefectural office, 2023), and some of these regions have struggled for over three decades to maintain essential social services, or attractive job opportunities (*Otoyochō no...*, 1994). But, regardless of this pessimistic view of their own region, all residents I spoke to were clearly happy living there and exhibited no wish to relocate even to the prefectural capital. They were simply resigned to the fact that to others, their hometown was not an attractive place to live. With this in mind, I wanted to understand how the region had changed over time and what it meant for the people living there.

As such, I asked my interviewees about the changes they had witnessed in their region over

the course of their life, particularly in relation to the *akiya* problem, as well as the reasons for those changes. Most of them were born and raised in the area. Some attributed changes to the reasons listed above, while others pointed to cultural and lifestyle changes in Japanese society. In one particularly frank interview, a resident even went so far as to suggest that Japanese people were becoming less "Japanese" (*nihonjinrashi*). He considered the start of this change to be the 1990s, during the so-called "lost decade" after the bubble era, a period during which outmigration by youth from Kochi accelerated (Nishikawa et al., 2016). Having witnessed both Japan's rise as an economic powerhouse and its subsequent decline, this resident perceived a generational gap resulting from differences in core values. He claimed that youth nowadays were becoming more individualistic, and that in order for Japan to recover from economic collapse, Japanese people needed to go back to the old "starting line" (*sutātorain*) of collectivism. In essence, he was facing a two-pronged dilemma. In his mind, not only had his generation failed at keeping his community alive, but the new generation was failing him in terms of upholding the values he considered crucial to being Japanese.

His sentiments in part reflect a common discussion. After the Covid-19 pandemic brought a heightened interest in teleworking from the countryside, discussions about migration failures (*ijū shippai*) and village society (*murashakai*), often associated with closed-mindedness and hostility towards outsiders, popped up on internet forums, YouTube, and even in mainstream media (Ota, 2020-11-30; *Chisana mura de kurasu YouTube channel*, 2022-12-16; Kato, 2023-01-26). The YouTube video cited paints a horrifying picture of social exclusion and close-minded locals that harass the newcomers until they become physically ill, currently with 5.1 million views (accessed 2024-01-25). Many comments under the video are of sympathy for the videographer, and many express extremely negative views on rural life, as well as rural residents.

Viewing the rural as diametrically opposed to the urban, is a common trope, which may be unsurprising since the term “rural” originally meant simply “space outside of the city” (Woods, 2011:17). In Japan there are several terms that illustrate similar connotations, such as *inaka*, and *chihō*, and more emotionally charged *satoyama* and *furusato*. Discussing these terms scholars Akagawa (2015), Ivy (1995), and Robertson (1988) have argued that the perceptions of rural life and cultural differences between the countryside and urban areas have deep historical roots, where the rural often comes to represent tradition, harmony, and stagnation, and the urban comes to represent modernity and progress. It is a definition that serves to solidify rural living and urban living as core identity markers for residents of either, which sometimes lead to a perception of insurmountable difference between the two in turn. Perhaps the department for encouraging migration at Kochi city office illustrated this point best, by releasing a promotional video where the two actors, one representative of the local population, one representing a migrant from Tokyo, sporting literal alien masks to demonstrate how they view their counterpart “like an alien” (*uchūjinmitai*) (Kochi city website, n.d.).

In conclusion, local residents are more hesitant about the likelihood of repopulation success than official workers, experiencing not only a disinterest in their region, but a cultural gap between themselves and younger urbanites, a gap that seems to be growing. Despite their intimate knowledge of vacant homes and inheritance patterns in *akiya*-heavy areas, residents see little incentive for younger generations to return to their hometowns, especially considering the lack of desirable opportunities. This sentiment reflects long-standing demographic challenges faced by regions like Kochi, exacerbated by societal and economic changes over decades. Interviews reveal a perception among some residents that Japanese society has shifted away from traditional values, contributing to a cultural mismatch between generations. This sentiment is

echoed in discussions about rural life, often framed in opposition to urban living, perpetuating stereotypes and solidifying identities. Overall, the narrative highlights the complex economic, social, and cultural factors that shape rural communities in Japan.

Interpreting Connection, Values, and Belonging

As mentioned earlier, the local residents are often the best source of information regarding the location and status of vacant houses, as well as information on how to contact property owners. In some instances, they even collaborate to maintain the exterior of these vacant properties to deter squatters and other illicit activities. However, they are less prone to the optimism of the official narrative. Despite efforts by the state, prefecture, and municipality to repopulate, they have seen very few results, and as success and happiness is increasingly becoming synonymous with a high-paying job, rural areas are unable to compete with their urban counterparts, at least within that definition. And they simply may not want to. In the stories of my interviewees a prevailing theme emerges beside the fear of the community disappearing. The strongly held belief that prospective migrants should be prepared to adapt to the local way of life, a lifestyle centred around communal responsibility.

Finally, and of most import, in interviews residents emphasised their strong belief in community, local traditions, and shared responsibilities as a way of life. In their minds, if newcomers are not willing to adapt to the community and its traditions, their migration will not help to save the community. These findings challenge the notion held by officials that housing, jobs, and schools alone can solve the depopulation issue and instead highlight the immense importance of connection to local residents, as well as their reluctance to invite new people into their midst purely for the sake of repopulation. The *akiya* problem is a multi-faceted and complex issue which Japan in coming years will have to face in earnest.

To return to the title of this essay, while *akiya* may well be used as a tool in the fight against depopulation, there are still many obstacles in the way. As few are willing to relocate, and local residents are hesitant to allow for the change an influx of newcomers potentially means, it is likely the depopulation of rural areas will continue regardless of the fate of the houses. Japan stands at a crossroads: it must either intensify efforts to repopulate the countryside, which will require more comprehensive integration strategies, or accept depopulation as an ongoing reality rather than a problem to be solved. There are many things that could become of a depopulated neighbourhood, many kinds of second stories to tell, and maybe they need not include repopulation. For now, it might be of more import focusing on ensuring quality of life of those who remain and consider what future lies beyond depopulation.

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