

## FACTORS OF URBAN-RURAL MIGRATION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF I-TURN MIGRANTS IN RURAL JAPAN

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses social and economic circumstances under which I-turners are living after they moved to rural communities, as well as their reasons for migration. The study was conducted in some selected rural areas in Kinki Region of Japan. A structured questionnaire was distributed to I-turners in the research areas and descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. The study revealed that the main reasons why I-turners moved to the rural areas are; preference to quiet and relaxed rural life (51.1%), to be engaged in agriculture (31.9%), and strong desire to raise kids in the rural environment (29.8%). The economic situation of the I-turners was not favourable as most of them earned a lower income after moving away from the cities. They also have to cope with decreased savings. Majority of them indicated that their expenditure was higher in the city compared to that in the village. At the same time, I-turners were also helped by the villagers in a variety of ways. The negative effect of unfavourable economic condition was offset partly by material assistance and moral support from neighbors, along with lower cost of living in rural areas. Meanwhile, some I-turners also experienced negative aspects of village life, such as the closed nature of village leadership and obligation to take part in communal work. Despite a harsh economic condition and other inconveniences, however, many I-turners expressed their contentment with village life due to various benefits they received from the other villagers, fellow I-turners as well as from natural environment. Thus sustainability of I-turners' livelihood is not only dependent on their financial bases, but also on their social relationships with the original villagers as well as a pastoral landscape, which has been maintained by farming practice of rural residents.

**Keywords:** I-turners; Socio-economic condition; Rural Communities; Japan

### 1. Introduction

Japan's rural communities have been facing diverse challenges, especially rapidly declining and aging population and resulting underuse of farmlands and forestlands. The need to revitalize village communities cannot be over-emphasized because they are no doubt the foundation for sustainable agricultural development and have served as the location of fulfilment for such multifunctional roles as food supply, land preservation, natural environmental conservation, cultural tradition maintenance, local people's livelihood and work, and so on (Xiaoping, 2013). Revitalization of rural communities in Japan has been most times triggered by the activities of migrants, especially the I-turn

type of migrants, most of whom are city born people moving into rural communities. These I-turners are often expected to possess creative ideas that is essential for rural revitalization.

This paper attempts to analyze the reasons for I-turn migration into the declining rural communities of Japan and examine I-turners' socio-economic condition in these communities. I-turners may migrate into villages for various reasons. One of the common motivations is their love for rural landscape, but strong motivation itself cannot sustain their livelihood. I-turners have to have a certain financial base to sustain their economic lives, as well as social relationship which may help them to accustom themselves to village life. Socio-economic condition is thus important for I-turn families to become firmly established in the village

Despite crucial importance of I-turners in revitalizing ailing rural communities, detailed analysis on their economic and social condition has so far not been made by the existing studies on Japan's rural problems (Ishikawa, 2008; Kakiuchi *et al.*, 1979; Matanle, 2008; MAFF, 2010; Odagiri, 2011; Tanaka *et al.*, 2011; Wijaya, 2013; Yamauchi, 2015). This paper, therefore, is going to analyze a series of socio-economic data on an individual household bases, which was collected from 47 I-turners in the Kinki Region of Japan. In doing so, this paper explores actual socio-economic circumstances in which I-turners are living, with special reference to I-turners' relationship with the other villagers, which may have a great potential for sustaining I-turn migrants in declining rural communities.

## 2. Methods

The survey was conducted in Nara and Kyoto Prefectures of Japan. In Nara Prefecture, two areas of different geographical characteristics were surveyed: (i) suburban areas which have easier access to Nara City; (ex-Tsuge, ex-Tsukigase, and ex-Sagawa Villages), (ii) and remote mountainous district areas (Higashi Yoshino Village, Yoshino Town, Totsukawa and Soni Villages). In Kyoto Prefecture, two areas were also surveyed: (i) rural part of Maizuru City (named Okadanaka area) in the northern part of the prefecture; (ii) and rural part of Ayabe City (Shigasato and Monobe Villages) which is located between Kyoto and Maizuru Cities. These areas in Nara and Kyoto Prefectures were selected due to their largest concentration of I-turners.

Data were collected between August and September, 2015, through a structured questionnaire delivered to the I-turners in the selected research areas. About 300 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 47 were eventually collected from 30 households (14 from Nara and 16 from Kyoto), consisting of 17 couples and 13 unmarried persons.

The questionnaire is divided into two sections: one for the entire household and the other for individuals. Some open-ended questions are included, in order to elicit each I-turners' personal opinion. To validate the result of the questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews were carried out with 9 key informants from the research areas (5 from Kyoto and 4 from Nara).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Reason(s) for Migration

##### 3.1.1. Demographic Characteristics

The average I-turners surveyed (23 males and 24 females) are middle aged, between 21 and 40 years, most of whom (18 or 38%) are university graduates. The migrants originated from 16 prefectures and Tokyo Metropolitan area. 68.1% are from Kansai Region, which implies that most of the I-turners did not move far away from their birthplace. Most I-turn households (80%) have lived in their villages of residence between the period of 1 and 11 years, while 20% indicated that they have lived there for more than 12 years. The average family size of I-turners' household is 2.4. There are a total of 20 children below the age of 15, living with the 40% of the total households surveyed, implying an average of 1.6 children per household.

##### 3.1.2. Major Reasons for I-turn Migration

The study revealed main reasons why I-turners left the city for the rural communities where they are now living (Table 1). The top in the list is their preference for the quiet and relaxed life which characterizes typical rural livelihood in Japan. Secondly, around 32% of them left the city for the rural area to be engaged in agriculture, mostly natural/organic farming. This motive is considered to be born out of their desire to produce and consume safe food. At the same time, farming engagement is viewed by them to be a part of their contribution to the rural community. The third popular reason for migration was I-turners' strong desire to raise their kids in the rural environment, as they were of the opinion that kids raised in the rural environment have a stronger moral character. As children are also seen as a communal asset, individual members of the community jointly take up the responsibility of raising them up. I-turners' major reasons for moving can be summed up to be their pursuit of 'happiness and fulfilment of dreams'. Other socio-economic reasons seem to have played only secondary roles in their decision to move.

##### 3.1.3. Reasons for Choosing a Particular Village

I-turners were further asked to tell what influenced their choice of moving into a particular village (Table 2). Love for the village's natural environment tops the list, followed by 'the villagers who I met were very kind' and 'to be close to my relative and friends'. It can be deduced that the I-turners' choice of village is greatly influenced by their value for social relationship as well as their priority placed on nature.

##### 3.1.4. How I-turners discovered the Villages they moved into

As Table 3 shows, the I-turners gained knowledge on the particular villages they moved into mostly through friends and relatives living in the village (49%), self – discovery (17%) and information from the local government (14.9%). This indicates that the existing residents in rural communities play a crucial role in attracting new residents into the village by maintaining a close relationship with their urban friends and relatives. At the same time, the roles of the media (magazines/books, internet, newspaper and television, accounting for 25.5% in total) and the local government (14.9%) in attracting new migrants into the rural areas cannot be ignored.

**Table 1.** I-turners' Reason(s) for Moving from the City to Village (Multiple Choice Responses)

Reason(s)	Frequency	%
Preference for quiet and relaxed rural life	24	51.1
To be engaged in agriculture	15	31.9
Strong desire to raise kids in the rural area	14	29.8
Tired of city life	10	21.3
To be self-employed	10	21.3
Found current job in rural area	8	17.0
Marriage related reasons	5	10.7
Low cost of living in the rural area	4	8.5
Health related reasons (radiation and sickness)	3	6.4
Landscape/ natural environment of rural areas	3	6.4
To live a self-sufficient life	2	4.3
Others	7	14.9

Source: Field survey, 2015. The same is applied to all the other tables except Table 4.

**Table 2.** Reasons for Choice of Village

Respondents' Reason for Moving into their Current Village of Residence	F	(%)
I love its natural environment	27	57.5
Villagers who I met were very kind	21	44.7
To be close to my relative and friends	15	31.9
Nearness to my place of work	7	14.9
Found suitable house in the village	5	10.6
Nearness to the city	5	10.6
Its cultural values	5	10.6
Found a work in the village	3	6.4
Suggested by a resident of the village	2	4.3
Others	6	12.8

**Table 3.** I-turners' Source of Knowledge of their Chosen Village

How did you know this place	Freq.	(%)
Through friends /relatives living here	23	49
Self- discovery	8	17
Through the administrative government	7	14.9
Through Magazines/books	6	12.8
Through the internet	4	8.5
It is the origin of my ancestors	2	4.3
Through Newspapers articles	1	2.1
Through television program	1	2.1

### 3.1.5. Are I-turners satisfied with Rural Life?

Most of the I-turners (83 %) indicated that they enjoyed rural life due to the following reasons: tranquil and relaxed lifestyle; rich natural environment; cooperative relationships with neighbours; their children are growing with less pressure than in

urban area; reduction in complaints from neighbours as regards to, for example, noise; unlimited freedom to keep pets of one's choice; greater safety; opportunity to be heard in community meetings, among others.

To ascertain the I-turners willingness to continue to stay in their chosen villages, they were asked if they had any plan to leave the village in the near future. Nearly half of them (42.5%) indicated that they did not have any plan to move in the future. 29.8% were yet to decide about this. Meanwhile, 17% responded that they might probably move, and only 8.5% disclosed their intention to leave the village in the future. This indicates that most I-turners were content with rural life despite a variety of challenges they faced, particularly a lack of institution for higher education such as high schools and universities. The benefits they are getting from rural life seem to currently over ride their concern about future. However, some I-turnes may change their plan as their children approach adulthood, moving into another area where they can obtain an advanced education of high quality.

### 3.2. Economic Condition of the I-turners

In this section, economic condition of the I-turners in rural communities will be examined from the following viewpoints: households' average annual income, along with change of income before and after moving into rural areas; households' savings; and average monthly expenditure of each household.

#### 3.2.1. Average Rural Income and I-turners' household Average Annual Income

According to a statistics released by Mainich Shimbun Newspaper in April 2015 (Table 4), average annual income for rural part of Nara and Kyoto Prefectures (Yoshino, Minami- Yamashiro and Shimo-Kitayama) was about 2.6 million yen. Meanwhile, their urban counterparts (Ikoma City, Seika Town, Nara and Kyoto Cities) had an average income of about 3.7 million yen annually, indicating an income gap of about 1.1 million yen between urban and rural areas.

**Table 4.** Average Annual Income in Nara and Kyoto Municipalities (2013)

Municipality	Average Annual Income ('000yen)
Ikoma City	3,962
Seika Town	3,750
Nara City	3,649
Kyoto City	3,387
Yoshino Town	2,641
Minami – Yamashiro Village	2,566
Shimo-Kitayama Village	2,528

Source: Mainich Shimbun, 17th April 2015

Table 5 shows the average annual income of I-turners' household in the villages. 60% of the I-turners earned their income from employment, 30% from private business, 20% from agriculture, and 10% from part time jobs. "Others" category (10%) includes income from gratuity, children allowance from the government, and investment in stocks.

**Table 5.** Households' Average Annual Income (Yen)

Average Annual Income	Freq.	(%)
None	1	3.3
1 million and below	2	6.7
1 million - 2 million	11	36.7
2 million - 3 million	7	23.3
3 million - 4 million	5	16.7
4 million - 5 million	1	3.3
5 million - 6 million	3	10
Total	30	100

Tables 4 and 5 clearly indicate a generally poor economic condition of I-turners. 14 I-turn households (46.7%) fall below the average annual rural income in Nara and Kyoto Prefectures, out of which one household earned nothing at all at the time of the study. This household might have survived partly on their past savings. Meanwhile, 7 households (23.3%) fall within the range of the average annual rural income. Thus, majority of the households (21 or 70%) earned a lower income as compared with the average annual income of urban households. However, the other 9 households (30%) enjoyed a relatively high income, measuring up to that of their city counterpart, with 4 of them (13.3%) earning an income 1-2 million yen higher than average urban income.

### 3.2.2. General Decline in I-turners Income Level

The discrepancy between rural and urban income revealed in the data released by Mainich Shinbum is also found in the case of I-turners under study. More than half of the I-turners (59.6%) indicated that they experienced a decline in their income level since they moved into rural areas, with 31.9% indicating more than 50% decrease (Table 6). Only a handful of I-turners (15.1%) indicated that they had an increase in their income level. At the same time, for 21.3% of them, their income was unchanged.

The decline in the income of the I-turners adversely affected the amount of savings. According to Table 7, the majority (38 or 80.9%) of informants saved less than 300,000 yen annually or could not save at all. 21 or 44.7% indicated that they experienced a decline of savings after they moved into villages.

**Table 6.** Percentage Change in Income

Percentage change	Freq.	%
No change	10	21.3
Less than 10% Increase	2	4.3
10 – 30 % Increase	2	4.3
More than 50% Increase	3	6.4
10 - 30 % Decrease	3	6.4
30 – 50 % Decrease	10	21.3
More than 50% Decrease	15	31.9
No Response	2	4.3
Total	47	100

**Table 7.** Average Annual Savings

Average Annual Savings (in 1000 Yen)	Frequency	(%)
None	13	27.7
100 and below	13	27.7
100 - 300	12	25.5
500 - 700	2	4.3
700 - 1000	2	4.3
1000 and above	2	4.3
No Response	3	6.4
Total	47	100

### 3.2.3. I-turners Households Average Monthly Expenditure

The general decline in income of the I-turners' households might have also affected the size of expenditure in the village as well. Majority of the I-turn households (43.3%) spent only 100,000 yen or less monthly (Table 8). Monthly expenditure is generally low irrespective of family size and composition.

Most households (18 or 60%) claimed that they spent more while in the city than in the village. Diverse reasons provided by them for reduced expenditure include: they quitted wasteful life style characterizing urban life (67%); cheaper prices of goods (50%); food self-sufficiency in rural areas (50%); and other reasons which include receiving various things for free from their neighbours.

**Table 8.** Household's Average Monthly Expenditure

Household Average Monthly Expenditure (in Yen)	Freq.	(%)
100,000 and below	13	43.3
100,000 - 150,000	8	26.7
150,000 - 200,000	5	16.7
250,000 - 300,000	1	3.3
400,000 and above	1	3.3
No Response	2	6.7
Total	30	100.00

### 3.3. Social Condition of the I-turners

In this section, the social condition of the I-turners in the village will be examined from the viewpoint of diverse social relationships that exist between I-turners and villagers; various ways of assistance I-turners receive from their neighbours; I-turners' major source of information; and the number of intimate friends of different categories.

#### 3.3.1. I-turners' Nature of Relationship with Neighbours in the Rural Communities

Japanese villagers generally possess stronger communal ties as compared to their urban counterparts. Majority of the I-turners under survey (31 or 66 %) indicated that they had a closer relationship with people in their neighbourhood as compared to their former experience in the cities. As shown in Table 9, the top three reasons given by them for closer relationship with the villagers are as follows: villagers are more willing

to cooperate with other people (51.1%); it is easy to know one another in a small village (42.6%); and people in the countryside are kind (27.7%).

At the same time, 39 or 83 % of the I-turners indicated that they were still careful about their relationship with other villagers. This implies that the bonds between the I-turners and some of the local residents is not as tight as those among original villagers, as Ms. T, a key informant from Shigasato village, told us that social ties between I-turners and the villagers were not strong very much.

**Table 9.** Reasons for Closer Relationship with Neighbours (Multiple Choice Responses)

Reasons	Freq.	%
Villagers are more willing to cooperate with other people	24	51.1
It is easy to know one another in a small village	20	42.6
People in the countryside are kind	13	27.7
People in the country side are willing to spend time with neighbours	6	12.8
To avoid unnecessary conflict	5	10.6
Others	2	4.3

Besides, some I-turners, especially those bring about innovative ideas for rural development, often encounter resistance from conservative village elders. There are notable differences in thinking between the older residents and new-comers as Mr. A, another key informant from Shigasato village, put it:

“I-turners are striving to make a positive impact on village community, but such an attempt is often hindered by a discrepancy in thinking between I-turners and the local residents.”

### 3.3.2. Various Help Ways

Majority of the I-turners (85.1%) indicated that they were being helped by the villagers in one way or another. They were further asked to list the ways in which they received help from the villagers. 36.2% simply replied that the villagers were very cooperative. 25.5% received various kinds of information, advice and assistance in farming. I-turners not only gained knowledge about farming technique but also useful information on available farm land. 19.2% indicated that they received assistance in their children upbringing, and the same percentage of them received vegetables and other kinds of food from neighbours (Table 10).

**Table 10.** Ways I-turners receive help from neighbours

Help ways	Freq.	%
Neighbours/Villagers are very cooperative	17	36.2
Receives information, advice and assistance in farming	12	25.5
Receives vegetables and food from neighbours	9	19.2
Assistance in children upbringing	9	19.2
Receives information and guidance about rural life	5	10.6

### 3.3.3. Information Sources

I-turners’ major sources of information indicate a good level of cooperation and effective communication between them and the villagers. 66 % and 46.8% of them

indicated that they source information about what is happening in the village directly from neighbours and friends, respectively. These figures are higher than those for other sources of information available to I-turners such as print media (news letter from the local government, community or local newspapers, community bulletin board, and portable neighbourhood notice board) and internet including social networking service (e.g. Facebook).

3.3.4. I-turners' Friends in the Village

I-turners under study were also asked how many close friends do they have in their neighborhood according to the following four different categories; (1) friends with whom they feel at ease; (2) friends with whom they can discuss private matters; (3) friends from whom they can borrow money as much as 100,000 yen; and (4) friends they can call on for help in times of emergency (Table 11). 70.2% of the I-turners had at least one friend with whom they feel at ease, while 63.8% of I-turners had at least one friend with whom they can discuss private matters. 48.9% of them indicated they have at least one friend who can lend them money as much as 100,000 yen, while 74.4% of the I-turners indicated they have at least one friend they can call on for help in times of emergency.

**Table 11.** Number of I-turners' Friends in the Village by Different Categories

Number of friends	Friends you feel at ease with	Friends with which you can discuss private matters	Friends who can lend you money as much as 100,000 Yen	Friends you can call on for help in times of emergency
None	12 (25.5%)	15 (31.9%)	22 (46.8)	6 (12.8%)
1	4 (8.5%)	4 (8.5%)	7 (14.9%)	5 (10.6%)
2	7 (14.89%)	9 (19.15)	4 (8.51%)	7 (14.89%)
3	5 (10.6%)	3(6.4%)	7 (14.9%)	10 (21.3%)
4	3 (6.4%)	2 (4.3%)	1(2.1%)	2 (4.3%)
5	5 (10.6%)	7 (14.9%)	-	1(2.1%)
6	-	1(2.1%)	-	-
7	1 (2.1%)	-	-	-
8	-	-	-	1(2.1%)
10	4 (8.5%)	4 (8.5%)	3 (6.4%)	6 (12.8%)
13	1 (2.1%)	-	-	1(2.1%)
20	1 (2.13%)	-	1(2.13%)	2(4.26%)
30	2 (4.3%)	-	-	-
No Resp.	2 (4.3%)	2 (4.3%)	2 (4.3%)	6 (12.8%)
Total	47(100%)	47 (100%)	47 (100%)	47 (100%)

Though above figures indicate that a wide range of friendship is available to I-turners in the rural communities, this in turn implies that I-turners themselves have to fulfill a variety of social obligation as a member of the community. As Mr. O, a key informant from ex-Tsukigase village, told us:

“Making friends is not always easy at the beginning for I-turners. In my village, people are open and welcome new members, but you have to be involved in various village activities to achieve this”

Active participation in village works and other social responsibilities have remained an effective way to be accepted in Japan's rural communities. The village works/activities I-turners are expected to be involved in may include: maintenance of irrigation canals; maintenance of community roads; maintenance of community shrines and temples; maintenance of local primary/ secondary schools and community halls; fire service work; maintenance of community forest; grass clearing at public spaces; snow removal in winter time; guarding of local swimming pool; and conservation of farmland, among many others. Types and organization of village works differ considerably from one community to another according to each local context.

Existing studies have shown that there is a relationship between participation in community activities and trust built among its members. Nishide et al. (2005) contends that those who participate in some kind of social activities (i.e. voluntary activities, community based activities, and sports and other recreation) tend to have a higher level of trust in society, a broader network in communities, and a higher satisfaction in life than those who do not participate.

Mr. A, a 43-year-old I-turner in Shigasato village, shared his experience with us on how he was accepted by Shigasato villagers. According to him, on arrival at the village in 2009, he was very much concerned about local residents' evaluation of him. He eventually realized that he must be very active in agriculture in order to give a favorable impression on other villagers, as he put it; "working hard on the farm constitutes a very important factor in villager's evaluation of new arrivals." Besides, he was also convinced that his active participation in village work helped to achieve recognition as a village member. He also believed that he was making success in his soba noodle restaurant business because of the local residents' acceptance of him as a member of the community.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above analysis revealed that economic situation of most I-turn households was generally poor in terms of annual income and savings. More than half of the I-turners had to put up with a decreased income in the rural area. However, such a negative effect of unfavourable economic condition of I-turners was offset partly by a reduced expenditure in the rural area through (1) bilateral relationship with their neighbours, through which various direct and indirect assistance were provided, (2) lower cost of living in the rural area, and (3) opportunity to produce their own food to achieve a partial food self-sufficiency.

In regard to social condition, the I-turners generally enjoyed close relations with the villagers, which were displayed on a variety of social occasions. At the same time, I-turners had to participate in various communal activities to build up trust among villagers.

Such a social obligation and other inconveniences notwithstanding, the majority of I-turners seem to have been satisfied with rural life. It is worthy of note that, in the first place, most I-turners were attracted to the quiet and relaxed rural life. As one of the key informants, Ms. N insisted;

"Villages do not need any amenities. A village is beautiful and attractive as it is. It has everything that makes the place rural, such as fresh air, clean water, and landscape. A healthy life it offers itself is enough for the dwellers. To bring something new from the city to a rural area will make it 'un-rural', and when this happens, the village will lose its original nature, beauty, and attractiveness."

Therefore, to encourage the I-turners (especially those with aspirations to contribute toward the solution of rural problems) to continue to live in the rural area, villagers and local government should concentrate their efforts in making the villages more attractive for the I-turners, rather than trying to make them more convenient and comfortable places like cities. Providing material support for I-turners' farming engagement is especially important, because many migrants have expressed great interest in agriculture. Findings from this study also suggest that I-turners' social relationships with villagers are one of the deciding factors in keeping I-turners living in a particular village. Future research should delve deeper into the role of social capital of I-turn migrants in revitalizing rural communities in Japan.

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