ABSTRACT
As current discourses on “perishing municipalities” predict a dark future, especially for municipalities with a population of less than 10,000, this paper looks at three case-study sites (with populations of less than 1,500) in Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures and how they deal with demographic change. The main objective of revitalization is to attract newcomers, either for short-term urban-rural exchange or ideally for residents. Consequently, rural municipalities advertise those assets that cities cannot compete with: their natural resources. Agriculture is fostered in the communities in various aspects. For the aged population, farm work is a way to stay physically active and socially engage with others. For those retired locals, newcomers and visitors who are not involved in agriculture, there are groups involved in hobby farming and food processing as new leisure (or educational) activities. Lastly, for newcomers who are expected to contribute to the revitalization of the municipality, agriculture is an important driver and represents a precious asset of rural communities. Referring to Baltes & Baltes’ SOC-model, which is usually linked to successful ageing, I investigate how the elements of selection, optimization and compensation can be seen in the municipalities’ strategies to overcome demographic challenges.

KEYWORDS: rural Japan, depopulation, Masuda Reports, revitalization programs, case study, Nagano, Yamanashi

Introduction
Over the past several decades, Japan’s rural regions have seen major transformations. More than ever, rural municipalities are struggling with ageing populations and their consequences: young people out-migrating, local shops closing, schools that have to be closed due to the shortage of children, with vacant houses left to decay, their ruins becoming a burden for the environment, and with abandoned fields which cause nature to intrude into the villages. This is not an unusual, but rather a typical scenario in many parts of the Japanese countryside, and “villages at the
edge of existence” (*genkai shūraku*) or “perishing municipalities” (*shōmetsu suru jichitai*) are repeatedly discussed in the media as well as in academia. Japan’s population ranks very high in terms of the proportion of the elderly. Currently, more than a quarter of the population is aged 65 or older, and a decrease in the total population has been observed since 2008 (Statistics Japan 2014), because more people are dying than are born yearly. The government of Japan has been unwilling to compensate the population shrinkage with an increase of immigrants (the proportion of foreigners in Japan is less than 2% of the total population; Akashi 2014: 178). Therefore, the ticking of the “imploding” time bomb is audible not only in Japan as a whole (cf. Coulmas and Lützeler 2011), but more alarmingly in all rural regions, where depopulation harshly affects the social community structure, the agriculture and forestry sectors, and the ecological situation of farm- and forestland as important resources of biodiversity.

This paper examines recent discussions of “rural depopulation and ageing”, and analyzes revitalization initiatives by various agencies (government, municipal administration, NPOs and interest groups) in three rural municipalities. It argues that rural communities make use of their own assets of their environment and agriculture in order to compensate for the inconveniences of rural life. The article first introduces current discourses on rural depopulation, especially on “perishing municipalities”, triggered by the so-called “Masuda Reports”. It then examines the ways in which depopulation has been dealt with in three rural case study sites in Nagano and Yamanashi prefectures, where fieldwork was conducted. Drawing also on primary material of municipal documents and on interviews with senior informants and experts from the administration, the health sector and NPOs, I give examples of revitalization projects, which try to counteract depopulation and land abandonment. The various strategies will be analyzed by making use of Baltes’ theory of “successful ageing”, which describes aspects of selection, optimization and compensation. The psychologists Paul B. and Margret M. Baltes identified tactics that are used by the elderly to overcome their deficiencies in terms of physical and

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1 The research project was conducted with support by the OeNB’s Anniversary Fund (project members and fieldwork conductors: Pia Kieninger and the author; project head: Sepp Linhart) at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna in 2013/14. Two fieldwork stays were realized with funding by the German Institute of Japanese Studies (DIJ), the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), and the Austrian Research Association (ÖFG).

2 Selection, optimization and compensation are not regarded as consecutive steps, but all three elements are interlinked in the process of adaptation to the conditions of old age. Therefore, the model is also called “selective optimization with compensation” (Baltes & Baltes 1989: 5).
psychological fitness. An individual therefore selects fields of activities which have higher priorities, and tries to optimize their abilities in certain areas. In this way, strategies are used to improve certain skills, while compensating for weaknesses in other areas (Baltes and Baltes 1989). This model of adaptation is not limited to the ageing process, but is used in most areas of life. However, in old age, it becomes more important, as biological, mental and social capacity reserves decline (Baltes and Baltes 1989: 9). While Baltes’ SOC-concept of “successful ageing” usually deals with individuals (elderly people), in this paper it is used for the ageing community as a whole. The main interest deals with the following questions: (i) how can depopulated municipalities “age successfully”?: and (ii) which tactics do they use to strengthen their resilience to either counteract or adapt to demographic changes?

Rural Japan – Its Historical Context and Current Problems

Odagiri Tokumi describes four phases of degradation in rural Japan, which are especially drastic in mountainous areas (Odagiri 2009: 3-7, 2014: 15-43): First, the degradation of population, which started from the 1960s onwards when many young people migrated from rural to urban areas. The present population shrinkage in rural areas, however, is less caused by out-migration, but by natural decrease as the death rate is higher than the birth rate. The second phase is the degradation of land-use, which started in the mid-1980s. With a decrease of labour force in agriculture and forestry, farm- and woodland became abandoned and devastated, causing the next phase, the degradation of villages. Along with the problem of ageing and depopulation, the term genkai shūraku (“villages at the edge of existence”) was created, indicating villages, where more than half of the population is aged 65 and older, and the community functions are weakening. The last phase is the degradation of pride, when locals themselves see a dark future for their village, and therefore wish that their children leave and start better lives outside, in less depopulated areas. To counteract this development, Odagiri stresses the importance of the local residents’ participation in developing local industries, which make use of domestic resources, deriving from the distinct climate, natural conditions and geography.

Depopulation in rural areas has intensified since the 1990s, and the farming sector is weakening due to the ageing of farmers, who often do not have successors, thus causing a decline in productivity (Elis 2011: 445-446). Looking at the development in agriculture, commercial farming households decreased from 1985 to 2000 by 10%, and more drastically from 2005 to 2010 by almost 17%. The number of “agricultural
management entities” (ながれけいたい) also decreased from about 2 million in 2005 to 1.67 million in 2010 (a decrease of 16.4%) (Andô 2013: 2-3). Food self-sufficiency in Japan is weakening and amounted to only 39% in 2016 (MAFF 2017). The average age of people working in agriculture is 65.8 years, and the share of people aged 70 and above increased from 24.7% in 1995 to almost half (47.8%) in 2010 (Andô 2013: 5).

Besides internal changes, such as the ageing of the population, there are also external factors which have contributed to a weakening of living standards in rural areas. Volker Elis analyzes a “process of peripherization”, where the infrastructure has become more and more concentrated in central settlements (e.g. the Great Heisei Merger Wave, when the number of municipalities nearly halved within the period 1999-2006, resulting in large administrative cuts in smaller municipalities), and concludes that “[d]emographic decline is rather the outcome than the initial cause of the many structural problems rural areas are facing today.” (Elis 2011: 459).

The trend of continued out-migration of the younger generation leads to parents and grandparents being left in the countryside. Looking at the proportion of elderly single-person households in 2010, one finds that they constituted 9.2% of the total number of households, while another 10.1% were households with only an elder couple (MIC 2013: 4-5). In 2000, the government introduced a long-term care insurance (LTCI) system to back up institutional healthcare services. Some 5.6 million elderly people were eligible for assistance services through the LTCI system in 2014 (MHLW 2015: 12).

In addition to the ageing population in the rural region, there is a high proportion of never-married men around 50 in underpopulated municipalities, and another growing household pattern is that of single men (either never-married or divorced) living together with their fathers or mothers (Tanaka and Iwasawa 2010: 397-400). This new reality in the rural area is challenging many aspects of livelihood, and municipalities are putting much effort into finding ways to counteract the process of population shrinkage, which is not only a quantitative, but also a qualitative phenomenon (cf. Feldhoff 2013: 100). Rural municipalities are promoting their assets, which cities cannot offer, namely their natural resources, thus attracting newcomers to live in small-scale communities, where the water and air are better than in the cities, where children can experience and appreciate nature, and where healthy food can be grown on one’s own.
The Perishing Regions – the Masuda Reports
The problem of population shrinkage has recently gained considerable media attention after the release of the so-called “Masuda Reports” (Masuda repōto in Japanese; in English better translated as “Masuda Reports” in plural, since it consists of various papers), named after the author Masuda Hiroya, former governor of Iwate prefecture (1995-2007) and former minister of Internal Affairs and Communication (2007-2008). Together with the Japan Policy Council (Nihon sōsei kaigi), Masuda published various papers on the demographic future of Japan, among them two articles in the widely known monthly journal Chūōkōron. The first was included in the 2013 December issue on “Perishing regional cities”. Masuda refers to Japan’s current population shrinkage as a “chronic disease”, which should be cured at the earliest stage possible. Japan’s population, amounting to 128 million in 2010, will shrink below 100 million in 2060 if the situation remains unchanged (Masuda 2013: 20). For Masuda, one indicator of a region’s sustainability is the share of the population who belong to the main reproductive force, i.e. women aged 20 to 39 (also referred to as “young women” in this paper). According to current statistics, many municipalities suffer from the out-migration of this population group. Assuming that future population change will further develop as it did in the time period from 2010 to 2015, Masuda predicts that by 2040 the number of young women will have decreased by 50% or more in almost half (49.8%, or 896 municipalities) of the total number of municipalities. Among these municipalities, 523 municipalities will have less than 10,000 people by 2040, and are likely to disappear (Masuda 2013: 26-27). To solve regional population shrinkage, Masuda recommends as a first step that municipalities offer support for marriage, pregnancy, birth and child rearing, in order to sustain their population size. Second, policies are needed to avoid concentration in urban centres, so that the population density will become more equal. Third, the recruitment and training of human resources is important (Masuda 2013: 29-30).

The second article in Chūōkōron appeared in its June 2014 issue entitled “523 perishing municipalities”. It is also known as the “Masuda List” since it explicitly registers the names of the municipalities that are likely to disappear by 2040, as already mentioned in the first article (Masuda 2014a: 32-43).

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3 The publications are authored as “Masuda Hiroya and the Japan Policy Council”, but Masuda is the only explicitly mentioned name. In this paper, only Masuda is indicated as the author in the references.
Isabelle Prochaska-Meyer

Masuda and the Japan Policy Council also published a detailed book entitled *Perishing regions* in August 2014, with the main argument that “Tokyo’s extreme population concentration is propelling depopulation” (which is also the subtitle of the book). For Masuda, measures have to be taken quickly so that Japan as a whole can achieve “success” – which, in his understanding means that a fertility rate of 2.1 or more is reached (Masuda 2014b: 41). Since population shrinkage in Japan will spread from peripheral regions to urban areas and finally to Tokyo, he proposes making the regions more attractive so that they can fulfill a “dam function” and act as a “defense line” preventing the depopulation of Tokyo (Masuda 2014b: 47-49). In order to achieve this, Masuda argues for the creation of compact towns, “regional core cities” with a population of more than 200,000 (Masuda 2014b: 51-52).

To summarize, the Masuda Reports call for a de-concentration of population in the Tokyo area. Indeed, the population of this area (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba) amounts to 36.12 million, which is more than a quarter (28.4%) of the total population of Japan (data for 2010-2015; Statistics Japan 2016: 8). Adapting Baltes’ model of selection – optimization – compensation, Masuda recommends to focus on compact cities in the belt area (selection) as a preventive strategy to counteract the concentration in Tokyo, while small municipalities are expected to disappear (compensation). These cities should act as “buffer zones” and offer good living standards, attracting people from both urban and peripheral areas. To counteract the low birth rate, municipalities have to actively offer child-care-friendly environments for young families (optimization). Regarding the gender aspect, it is laudable that Masuda addresses socio-political issues, and speaks also for companies offering child-friendly environments, emphasizing that men must participate more in household matters, including paternity leaves (Masuda 2014b: 81-88). On the other hand, there is a heavy burden laid on women in the age group 20-39, who are regarded as the main drivers for natural population increase. In claiming that more sexual education and knowledge concerning late (i.e. delayed) child birth are needed (Masuda 2014b: 77), Masuda implicitly shifts the causes for low birth rate from socio-economical, socio-political reasons to the alleged lack of knowledge in women of reproductive age.

The primary sector (agriculture, forestry and fishery) is rarely mentioned in the reports. The use of local wood is described as a potential business for CLT (cross-laminated timber) and biomass, and the so-called “sixth

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industry” is expected to have great potential to promote agricultural products, tourism, health food, and to create a brand strategy, making use of the popularity and impact of washoku (Japanese cuisine) or the image of “cool Japan” (Masuda 2014b: 65). Masuda also claims that it is essential to create working opportunities for the elderly, for example farming for seniors (Masuda 2014b: 90).

**Criticism of the Masuda Reports**
The publication of the Masuda Reports soon triggered criticism. Two specialists on regional development, Yamashita Yūsuke and Odagiri Tokumi, each published a book reacting to the reports. Yamashita’s publication *The trap of perishing regions. The true facts on the “Masuda Reports” and depopulating society* and Odagiri’s *The rural villages won’t perish* both appeared in December 2014. The latter scholar also published a record of presentations held at a symposium in July 2014, entitled *The return to the countryside has started. A critique of the ‘discourse on perishing municipalities’* (Odagiri 2015).

Both authors criticize the sensational reaction of the media that followed the release of the Masuda Reports (Yamashita 2014: 14; Odagiri 2015: 9). Odagiri argues that the main points in the reports (low birthrate and population concentration in Tokyo) are not new at all, although the mass media might have created the impression that this situation has suddenly evolved. Speaking about the rhetoric in the reports, he shows that the word “depopulation” (kaso) is hardly mentioned. Instead, “population shrinkage” (jinkō genshō) or “perishing” (shōmetsu) are used. In addition, Odagiri points out that the authors of the reports have close ties to governmental sectors, such as the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Odagiri 2015: 9-10).

The scholars agree with Masuda’s argument that population concentration in Tokyo has to be halted. However, the plan of creating compact cities is regarded with great scepticism. Yamashita argues that the concept of a compact city as a “population dam” would just create a “quasi-Tokyo” (jun-Tokyo). Why, Yamashita asks, is it important to create other cities if the problem of depopulation is urbanization (Yamashita 2014: 49)? Odagiri also criticizes Masuda’s compact city model. It is not explained in the reports, he claims, why the population size of 10,000 people is crucial. According to Odagiri, small-scale municipalities are more likely to have a sustainable, stable population size. In addition, the Masuda Reports use data of 2010, but migration back to rural areas has been rising since 2011 (Odagiri 2015: 13).
To summarize, both Odagiri and Yamashita welcome Masuda’s advice to reduce the population concentration in the Tokyo area, but they speak against the formation of new urban areas in the periphery. Instead, they call for bottom-up initiatives and for an appreciation of small-scale communities in the rural region.

**Background Information on the Study Sites**

The fieldwork for the present study was conducted in three rural, mountainous municipalities over a period of four months in the winter of 2013 and the summer of 2014. Apart from participant observation during village events (e.g. sports’ day, religious festival) and activities, especially for the elderly (health courses, gateball tournaments etc.), 19 expert interviews (from the municipal administration, health sector, interest groups and academia) and 30 semi-structured narrative interviews with 38 key informants (in the age groups 65-74, 75-84 and 85+) were conducted. The case-study sites were chosen according to the following selection criteria:

1. Minimum proportion of 35% of people aged 65+
2. Population under 1,500 people
3. Mountainous municipalities in the Japanese Alps, reachable within approx. 3 hours from Tokyo by public transport

The three study sites were Minamiaiki and Kitaaiki in Nagano prefecture, and Kosuge in Yamanashi prefecture. All three are included in the Masuda List of 523 municipalities and therefore assessed to be at risk of disappearing by 2040. By that time, the proportion of women aged 20 to 39 is expected to have shrunk by more than half of the present population, and the municipalities’ total population size will be well below 10,000, which is of course already the present situation.

**Demographic Structure of the Study Sites**

The overall demographic trend of the last 30 years is similar in the studied sites (see figure 1): while in general the population size is shrinking, the proportion of the population aged 65+ is steadily increasing.

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5 The main focus of the research project was the relationship between farm activity and “active ageing”, a concept which was promoted by the WHO in the late 1990s to point to the active participation of elderly people in economic, social, cultural, spiritual and civil affairs (WHO 2002: 12).

6 In addition, the researchers Kieninger and Prochaska-Meyer produced a documentary film “65+. Being old in rural Japan” (2014, 35 min).
Within the municipalities, the villages differ in population size and proportion of elderly (Minamiaiki has ten villages, Kitaaiki consists of nine villages, and Kosuge has eight villages). The three municipalities extend with wide distances between the single villages (over 10 km between the villages which are furthest apart) from one end of the municipality to the other. While the villages in the centre of the municipality are less affected by ageing and depopulation (with population sizes from approx. 120 to 200 people), the peripheral villages are becoming smaller and smaller in size (less than 100) and the proportion of their elderly population is rising steadily. To give one example in numbers: in Minamiaiki, the municipal office and post office are in the center of Wada, a village with 130 people and an ageing rate of 38%. The most remote village is Kuryū, with a population size of only 34 and an ageing rate of 67% (as of 31.05.2015, data provided by the municipal office).

**Agriculture in the Studied Sites**

All three municipalities have a high proportion of forest (approx. 90% of the municipality area), but forestry is not a major business in any of the sites. Agriculture in Minamiaiki and Kitaaiki is dominated by the so-called highland vegetables (*kōgen yasai*), such as cabbage and lettuce, mainly cultivated by full-time farmers in a comparatively large-scale manner. These farmers often lease fields from (mostly senior) inactive farmers and recruit seasonal workers, e.g. from China or the Philippines. Apart from vegetables and buckwheat (*soba*), floriculture (mainly chrysanthemum) is
present in both municipalities. Recently, there has been almost no account of forestry and fishery in Minamiaiki and Kitaai. In 2010, the main income of nearly 50% of the 162 people engaged in agriculture in Minamiaki was farmwork (Minamiaikimura 2011: 22). Kosuge is situated in a narrow valley with steep mountains. Its fields are organized in long, narrow, vertical strips on steep slopes, locally called kakejiku batake (`Japanese scroll painting fields`). In the past, due to the existence of a river flowing to Tokyo, forestry was a lucrative source of income, as well as the production of wasabi, which grows naturally along the stream beds of the mountain river valleys. The main agricultural crops currently harvested in Kosuge are wasabi and the root vegetable konnyaku (Amorphophallus konjac), whilst trout and char are bred on fish farms. In 2010, the majority (24 people) of the primary sector was involved in forestry, 19 people worked in agriculture, with 7 people in fish breeding (Tokuei 2015a & 2015b). For self-subsistence, different kinds of vegetable and fruits are grown, such as potatoes, tomatoes or melons.

In order to counteract population shrinkage, all the three analyzed sites placed a lot of emphasis on newcomers – so called I- and U-turners (“I-turners” are newcomers from the city, and “U-turners” are former residents who have returned). In all municipalities, newcomers who have started an agricultural business in the village are highly praised as embodiments of best practice, for example in village promotion pamphlets or on the municipalities’ websites. Also, for the local villagers farmwork is an important way of life, both in economic and in social terms. Compared to a regular job at a company, which is terminated after retirement, farmwork is an activity which can easily be continued and provides both social networks and life satisfaction, as one local medical doctor explained:

“Usually, company employees have less contact with village residents, so many worry how to spend their retirement time. But in farming, there is agriculture for commercial sale, and then there is agriculture for oneself, just a little bit, as a hobby and for social interaction. (…) You can continue farmwork smoothly after you have reached retirement age. I think this aspect strongly relates to active ageing.” (Medical doctor, Kitaai, 25.10.2013).

Active elderly villagers who are still engaged in farming are also praised by the municipalities in local newsletters or on websites as role models of a healthy lifestyle. In all studied sites, the proportion of the elderly
population still active in farmwork (for their own consumption) is high. Out of our 38 senior informants, 28 were active in growing vegetables and fruit for their own use (23 informants), and some additionally for extra income (5 informants, including floriculture).

**Revitalization Strategies in the Analyzed Sites**

Depopulation, the deterioration of infrastructure and the increase in abandoned farmland are problems which all three municipalities are facing. The methods to adapt to these changes differ and are initiated on the national and municipal level as well as by private interest groups. In what follows, I will focus on revitalization strategies, which are related to the ecological system of the municipalities, making use of the natural resources and agriculture.

**National Initiatives: Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (Local Community Revitalization Corps)**

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications initiated the revitalization programme of the Local Community Revitalization Corps in 2009. Young people (mostly in their twenties and thirties), engage in activities for local revitalization (such as promoting local goods and tourist attractions), agriculture, forestry, fishery and nature conservation, and help in communal work (such as services for elderly people). The overall assumption of this programme is that after the expiry of three years (the minimum term is one year), the participants will be able to establish their own source of income in the municipality. The volunteers from the Revitalization Corps are employed in the municipal administration (in some cases, the prefectural administrations). Their salaries as well as accommodation allowances and promotion costs for the local governments are covered by the ministry (maximum 4 million ¥ per person). Since this programme started in 2009, the number of participants as well as participating administrations has risen from 89 corps members in 2009 to 3,978 members in more than 800 municipalities in 2016 (MIC n.d.).

Kosuge (programme periods 2011, 2013, 2014, 2015) and Kitaaiki (2014) joined this programme. In Kosuge, in particular, the pilot programme was quite successful. In the first period in 2011, the municipality recruited four women and two men in their 20s and 30s. They worked in various institutions, such as the municipal office, hot springs facility, adventure park and at a local NPO involved in nature education and student exchanges. The aim of the programme was not only to support the municipality with human resources, but also to change the awareness of the
local population: “New influences bring good impulses.” (municipal clerk, Kosuge, 08.11.2013).
Indeed, interaction with the local population is central in the activities of the Revitalization Corps. One could say that it is a win-win situation, Odagiri calls it the “mirror effect”, which evolves from urban-rural exchange (Odagiri 2014: 89): For the local (mostly senior) community, the fact that young people deliberately move to their municipality, and moreover appreciate the rural lifestyle, contributes to their own pride, which in Odagiri’s model of degradation is weakening in the final, fourth phase (after the degradation of people, land-use, and villages). For the members of the Revitalization Corps, their work gives them fulfillment, as it contributes to the regeneration of the municipality; moreover, they acquire knowledge and competence through interaction with the local community, which they would not have gained so easily without the programme.
Out of the six Revitalization Corps members of the first recruitment period, four stayed in Kosuge after completing their three-year term at the time of our fieldwork in summer 2014.

**Municipal Initiatives: Recruitment of Newcomers**
New housing for newcomers was established in Minamiaiki in 1980 and in mid-1990s in the other two municipalities, and has been run ever since. The monthly rent is very cheap, for example 10,000 ¥ for an apartment with dining room-kitchen and 3 rooms.
Kitaaiki’s policy is to establish new housing in those villages where the proportion of elderly residents is highest, to reduce the rate of ageing “so that newcomers can support the community” (municipal clerk, Kitaaiki, 21.10.2013). In the late 1990s, Kitaaiki built for I-turners a complex of around 20 council houses and apartments close to the sports ground in a remote area of Miyanotaira, which is today the biggest village of the community. Not only do young newcomers contribute positively to the age stratification of the community, they also contribute to the revitalization of the municipality, since many also plan to farm, either professionally or for own subsistence.

“There are also people who come here because they want to farm. The number of these people has increased in the recent time. If there is farmland [in the case when someone moves out of the village and owns property], which is still in good condition, then the municipality keeps it [as farmland], so that potential I-turners
can grow something there.” (municipal clerk, Kitaaiki, 21.10.2013)

In Minimiaiki, houses for newcomers have only been built in the main villages, to strengthen the population density in the centre of the municipality, while the peripheral villages are accepted (and expected) to disappear in the future:

“We currently focus on I-turners and U-turners. They are partly the reason why the population development is relatively stable. We have about 60 council apartments. I-turners and U-turners either move into vacant houses or apartments. And if there are council apartments with newcomers in a village, then the population can be stable in this village. This is the reason why the villages Mikawa and Kuryū are genkai shūraku, because there are no new apartments. From there, you need a longer time to drive to [the cities] Koumi or Saku for shopping. When you consider the distance to the next city, you cannot establish council houses in the peripheral villages of our municipality. That’s why genkai shūraku emerge.” (municipal clerk, Minamiaiki, 08.10.2013)

In Kosuge, the site selection for new housing depended on land availability, i.e. the new houses were built in closed housing estates (as new families were thought to prefer living close to each other) in two villages next to the main village of the municipality, where enough land was available. Besides, the municipal offices also provide information on vacant houses on their homepages. Recently private organizations have increased which inform on rural migration and mediate between potential newcomers and rural municipalities. At the time of the fieldwork, all three municipalities themselves coordinated the transactions.

“We mediate if someone is interested in moving to Kosuge. There is no real estate company here, not like in Tokyo. Therefore, we do all the transactions, we try to find the property owner and we mediate. Or sometimes potential newcomers contact us, and we ask if they are interested in only a house or also some farmland. And we introduce various options.” (municipal clerk, Kosuge, 08.11.2013)
In Kitaaiki, special 2-day-tours have been provided since 2013 for interested newcomers to interact with the local community and inspect potential houses and farmland. The municipality also offers commuting subsidies for newcomers who still maintain their work outside the municipality (e.g. a maximum of 360,000¥ per year for commuting by shinkansen).

In 2014, both Minamiaiki and Kitaaiki produced colourful pamphlets to promote the village to potential newcomers. Minamiaiki’s 32-page magazine is entitled Recommending Minamiaiki, and Kitaaiki’s 24-page version bears the title Let’s create our home here. In both pamphlets, stories of urban I-turners are highlighted, in addition to information on the municipality’s characteristics and activities. Features resulting from depopulation are positively praised in the case of Kitaaiki: “We do not have a konbini [24-hours “convenience store”], and even no traffic lights, but here you can ‘chase rabbits on the mountain’ and ‘fish in the river’”.

Minamiaiki’s promotional magazine introduces six positive “bragging” (jiman) sides of the municipality, the first three being:

1. Relations with neighbours are close. (…) The atmosphere of the village is like in a big family.
2. The village is full of nature. (…)
3. We only have one set of traffic lights. (…)

In Kosuge, there is a big sign close to the hot springs facility, which shows pictures of the municipality’s culture and nature through the seasons. The slogan on the sign says: “There is nothing, but… it’s a nice village.”

**Initiatives by Interest Groups: Fostering Agriculture and Rural-Urban Exchange**

The following examples of NPOs and interest groups also receive financial support from the municipality, but can be seen as bottom-up initiatives as they are driven by the motivation of the locals to create something that improves community life. As one of the founders of the Farmers’ Club (which will be explained in more detail) remarked, the formation of the group was rooted in the belief that one cannot passively wait, but has to actively try to improve the situation:

“In the past, the economy in this municipality ran quite well and there were many people. Back then, I was young and I thought that the municipal office and the council would manage the
village, and that the people are sort of passive. But now, the rates of ageing and out-migration are high. Therefore, you cannot leave everything to the administration and the municipal council, but we have to contribute to the regeneration of the village ourselves, because it is our village, this is where we live, and where our children should also stay. If local people don’t have such an attitude, then real revitalization cannot happen, and the community will shrink.” (Farmers’ Club founder member, Kosuge, 14.11.2013)

**NPO Tama Genryū Kosuge and Tamagawa Genryū Daigaku**
The so-called NPO Tama Genryū Kosuge (founded in 2009) and the education centre Tamagawa Genryū Daigaku (“University”, founded in 2006)\(^7\) are very active in Kosuge, together with a local research institute, which was founded in 2001 (Tamagawa Genryū Kenkyūjo n.d.). The organizations share three main tasks: 1) research on the society and culture of Kosuge and the neighbouring municipalities (by the research institute), 2) an exchange between local people and university students from urban areas (by the education centre), and 3) the organization of activities (e.g. wood-cutting and other forestry tasks) for private companies, in which employees can participate five times a year (by the NPO). The “University” is cooperating with different universities in Tokyo and every year around 1,500 students come for short stays in order to learn from locals about agricultural activities or to support local farmers:

“The goal was to revitalize the area through education. This brings students closer to agriculture and helps students of architecture learn how to produce timber for construction. (…) In Kosuge, there are no professional farmers. The inhabitants cultivate land only for themselves, even if they are in their 60s and 70s. (…) At labour-intensive times, many students come to help them, thereby exchange is fostered and students can learn different things about the local culture.” (representative of NPO, Kosuge, 11.11.2013)

The students are assisted by local teachers, approximately 70 people – mainly men aged 40-80. The “University” is financed by the municipality, as well as from national subsidies or private and company donations.

\(^7\) Despite the name *Daigaku*, it is not a real university.
The NPO also organizes tours for tourists to the “best spots” of the village, which last for about one hour and are advertised on the homepage and in the hot springs facility. The destinations are related to local agricultural products, for example kon’yaku fields or the local enoki mushroom cultivator. The tours are mainly aimed at one-day visitors from outside the prefecture (e.g. Tokyo, Saitama, Kanagawa) who come to the hot springs facility. Recent services of the NPO include “stress release tours”, or the provision of satellite offices for short-term stays for companies (NPO Kosuge 2016).

Minamiaiki nōsan kakō kenkyūkai (Minamiaiki Study Group for Agricultural Food Processing)
The Minamiaiki Study Group for Agricultural Food Processing is another example of an interest group with people mainly from the non-agricultural sector, who engage in farm work and food processing (e.g. tofu or miso). This group was founded in 2001, and currently has about 20 people (mostly women) in their 60s and 70s, meeting every two weeks. The group cultivates vegetables and also cooperates with the local primary school in organizing food education events. Three senior informants, I-turners themselves, mentioned their involvement in the Study Group. One woman moved to the countryside more than thirty years ago together with her husband and is among the “veteran I-turners” of the village. While her husband started a business in vegetable production and floriculture, she maintained a job in a public office, helping her husband during busy seasons. As a member of the Study Group, she stressed the importance of interaction with the community members, along with learning about local agriculture and food processing. Having learned about the village during multiple vacation stays, another couple moved from an urban area to Minamiaiki after their retirement in 2000. Neither of them had been involved in any farm work while still working, and joined the Study Group after moving in. The wife emphasized the social networks she now has thanks to the group:

“I am in the Study Group for Agricultural Food Processing, we make tofu from the local soy beans, or we grow vegetables, which are used for school lunches. My husband was a member first, because he was interested in how to make tofu. And thanks to this group, our circle of acquaintances has widened.” (I-turner, Minamiaiki, 14.10.2013)
Discussion and Conclusion: How Can Rural Communities Age Successfully?
Going back to Baltes & Baltes’ model of selective optimization with compensation, we can see the three elements of selection – optimization – compensation in the study sites. The municipalities focus on newcomers or U-turners for the stabilization of the population (selection). Geographical selection was also seen in Minamiaiki, as the municipal office plans new apartments in the central villages, and not in the peripheral ones, which are expected to show the harshest population decrease, and thus the shrinkage (or “perishing”, in media parlance) is accepted. For new settlers, municipalities offer special advantages (e.g. low rents, subsidies), and they facilitate migration into the village through information, mediation and coordination (optimization). As much as small-scale standards in a remote village are praised, one weak point in all three municipalities for young I-turners is the absence of high schools. Therefore, newcomers often leave the countryside once their children graduate from middle school. As of June 2015, Minamiaiki had 137 registered I-turners, who had moved to the municipality since 2008. Of these, 77 people (56%) had already left the municipality (data provided by the municipal office). Therefore, the fluctuation of newcomers must also be considered, although – looking at the glass as “half-full” – the fact that 60 people (44%) of the above-mentioned I-turners stayed in Minamiaiki can also be called a success.
Regarding natural resources, about 90% of the municipalities is covered by forest, therefore there is great commercial potential in forestry (Masuda 2014b: 65; Motani 2013: 137), which could create new job opportunities and thus constitute potential compensation. However, forestry is not (yet) a major industry in the study sites.
To conclude, the three case study municipalities – rather than counteracting population decrease – appear to accept their shrinkage problem. They focus on newcomers, ideally young families, and temporal residents, to compensate the out-migration of villagers. New residential areas are created in regions close to the center hamlet rather than in peripheral hamlets, which are most affected by the demographic change. The compensating element can also be seen in the strategy to turn a weakness into a strength (“small is beautiful”), when village life is promoted to outsiders. Municipalities advertise small-scale education, no traffic lights (or just one set), an easygoing lifestyle and hospitality, and natural resources (water, air, good food, nature education). Kosuge’s village slogan “We have nothing… but it’s a nice village” is spot-on, according to a former Revitalization Corps member who decided to stay in
the village after her recruitment time, to run a local cafe and to help with welfare activities. When asked what she was satisfied with in the village she gave some thought and then answered:

“What would that be… maybe with the fact that there is nothing here? Before I moved here, I lived in an environment where everything was available. This was very convenient in a sense. But now I don’t need all those things. Looking from outside, you might think that’s inconvenient, but… how can I explain it. When I hear stories from local seniors about the past and if I compare the situation with the present, then I think it’s very convenient the way we live today. But at the same time, it’s also very fragile. If you don’t have electricity, you cannot do anything. If the shops are closed, you don’t have anything to eat. If something is wrong, you cannot go further, there is a kind of fragility. But here [in the countryside], people think if you cannot do something, you just have to think about the next step and move on. For example, if your room is small and inconvenient, then I can build you a new one. Or, if you want to eat a certain thing, I will grow it for you in my field. Before I moved here, I thought only special people could do these things, but I have also learned a lot, little by little. And I realize that I can also do various things myself. And this is what I am most satisfied with, that I have learned so much about daily life.” (former Revitalization Corps member, Kosuge, 16.7.2014)

She started expressing her thoughts by mentioning “that there is nothing here”, but she concluded with the insight “I have learned so much about daily life”. Paraphrasing her quote in combination with the village’s slogan, it could be: “We have nothing… but we can create anything”.

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