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Living in a sharehouse in rural Japan

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by Cornelia Reiher

Finding housing in rural areas is a very important and sometimes difficult part of the urban-rural migrant experience. [Previous blogposts](#) have pointed out that while there are many abandoned houses in rural communities, it is often difficult to find housing because the owner is unknown or because they do not want to sell or rent their house. While many urban-rural migrants with families are looking for a house (*ikkenya*) or an apartment, single people, in particular, do not want to live alone for economic reasons or because they feel lonely. Therefore, sharehouses, a concept that has recently become more popular in Japan (Meagher 2020: 16), are now available in rural areas. However, there are not yet that many sharehouses and those in the areas I studied were established only in the last five years.



View from the window of the sharehouse over the roofs of the town

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During my fieldwork, I met many residents of sharehouses. For most, living in the sharehouse was temporary, but there were also some long-term residents and those who have stayed for a short time, left and then returned to live in the sharehouse for a longer period of time. Sharehouses in the countryside seem to serve several functions: They provide a place to live and often work, new experiences and encounters with diverse people from different backgrounds and valuable information about the city for newcomers. They can also be places where locals and newcomers

meet. For example, in the basement of one sharehouse I visited, there is an event space that can be transformed into a coworking space, a café, a concert space, or a pop-up restaurant where locals, Japanese migrants and foreign residents come together.



*The living room and kitchen of the sharehouse where I stayed
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I lived in a sharehouse myself during my last field research in the spring and shared the house with two people, a man and a woman in their thirties, who had moved to the city from big cities in Kanto and Kansai. Since the sharehouse had only opened last October, three rooms were still unoccupied and were therefore rented out to short-term visitors like me. On the first floor were three bedrooms and a bathroom. Upstairs was the kitchen, which was also used as a living room, another bathroom and two bedrooms. The decor was a very stylish mix of DIY renovation, old furniture, textiles and IKEA.



*The sharehouse was renovated by its owners with the help of volunteers
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Although I had met a resident of the sharehouse during my last field research, I was very nervous about sharing a house with strangers. My last experience with a shared apartment was during my student days, and I didn't really know what to expect. But it turned out to be a very pleasant experience. We prepared and ate meals together, went out for drinks or just had a nice chat when we met in the kitchen. According to my temporary roommates, one advantage of living together is that they can share food and there are no leftovers. Although they both do their own grocery shopping and each has a basket of non-perishable food like coffee that is not shared, they order vegetables together from a farmer and share them. And if they need something that is not available in town, they order it individually online. Most of the migrants I interviewed agreed that ordering things online makes life in the countryside much more convenient. It was very interesting to see what was shared and what was not shared by the residents of the sharehouse and how they organize their shared space.



A radish from a local organic farmer's food delivery and a box from Amazon
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Staying in the sharehouse made me realize how important they are for newcomers. Both of my roommates agreed that they came to this city because of the sharehouse and its owners. They both learned about the sharehouse from others who lived there for a short time or helped the owners renovate the sharehouse. They were also impressed by their social media accounts, and when they first visited, the owners introduced them to interesting people, which is why they both think the city is exciting, offers many opportunities, and is home to interesting people. In light of the difficult housing situation in many rural communities, sharehouses can provide housing for newcomers, independent of the sometimes quite limited community support systems. They also offer newcomers many opportunities to connect with locals and learn from the experiences of other urban-rural migrants. Thus, sharehouses are important hubs for urban-rural migrants and also places where many activities take place that make rural communities more interesting.

Reference

Meagher, Caitlin (2020), *Inside a Japanese sharehouse: dreams and realities*, London and New York: Routledge.