

# Revitalization strategies in rural Japan: a case study of Kamiseya, Kyoto prefecture

Binxian Ji

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## 1. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The increasing severity of depopulation and aging Japan-wide is particularly acute in rural Japan, where it is a huge challenge to maintain rural areas to keep people living there and countryside viable. This study focuses on some of the challenges and solutions for revitalizing Japan's rural regions through a case study based on the author's field experience in Kamiseya, a small village in Miyazu in northern Kyoto prefecture, where revitalization activities are already underway.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Two methodologies are used in this research: interviews with residents of Kamiseya who live there full-time or part-time, and questionnaire surveys of participants in four key activities carried out in the village. Villagers were asked about the village's history, their memories of lives spent living and working in the village, their reflections on what it is like to live in Kamiseya and their hopes and concerns for the village's future. The questionnaires combined simple "closed" questions and more complex open-ended questions. The "closed" questions asked about the participants' basic information. The "open" questions probed participants' motivations, influence after activities, problems of Kamiseya and revitalization strategies. I distributed the questionnaire surveys at the time at which these activities were being held or asked the activity organizers to distribute them on my behalf. Completed questionnaires were collected on site, by postal mail or email attachment.

## 3. FINDINGS

In total, I conducted 21 interviews with residents of Kamiseya and collected 129 completed surveys from participants in the activities being held in the village. The main residents in Kamiseya are composed of aging local residents and retired incomers. Villagers farm almost for self-consumption. The main income sources for villagers are state and company pensions, even some newcomers believed that there were some job possibilities. Almost all residents want more incomers to the village, even though some of them have some specific objectives and worries.

The results of a comparative analysis of the questionnaires show that people living in urban areas are interested in experiencing rural life and activities that are new to them. They enjoy the activities as an opportunity for communication and working with others and as a chance to appreciate food and how it is produced. Activities also prompt participants to think deeply about things and reconsider their lifestyles – particularly in the case where the participants are young students. Gender is a contributing factor in terms of who does what activity, and young people and adults have very different suggestions and strategies as to what should be done for Kamiseya in the future. Cross-referencing the results of the interviews and questionnaire surveys also yields results. Local people and outsiders alike consider aging and depopulation to be Kamiseya's main problems. However, most of local people consider heavy snowfall as a major problem causing difficulties for commuters and farmers from November to April. Local residents worry that having no school will be problematic for young incomers wanting to live in Kamiseya. Conversely, outsiders participating in village activities worry about how to maintain the status quo in Kamiseya and cite job creation initiatives, better infrastructure (ie, improvements to public transport) and enhanced efforts to publicise the village's attractions as revitalization strategies worth pursuing.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The revitalization activities that are being carried out in Kamiseya pass on valuable agricultural traditions and teachings to participants, as well as a window on to rural life. The revitalization strategies elucidated in this thesis bring new life to a village beset by the problems of aging, depopulation and snowfall. However, activity organisers need assistance and cooperation from governments and other organizations as well as personal effort if these kinds of initiatives are to multiply.