



# Migrants in the Era of Remote Work

Sawada Akihiro, Journalist



Mount Fuji and Mishima City (Shizuoka Prefecture)  
Photo: Yoshitaka/PIXTA

Since moving from Tokyo to Awaji Island in Hyogo Prefecture because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sawada Akihiro has painstakingly reported on the realities of the corona migration and of rural life. He has now published his findings in *Tokyo wo suteru: korona iju no genjitsu* (Leaving Tokyo: the reality of corona migration) (Chuko Shinsho La Clef), a book that engages with the real face of the corona migrants who have left Tokyo.

## Windsurfing on the Fuji Five Lakes

“Exiting the subway station closest to my home in Tokyo, I couldn't see the moon.” Ishibashi Minako (pseudonym, 33), PR officer at the IT venture company Thinkings (Chuo Ward, Tokyo), lived in a rented apartment in Chuo Ward, Tokyo. Her rent for the one room apartment with a kitchen (26 m<sup>2</sup>) was 106,000 yen.

After the declaration of a state of emergency in April 2020 when her employer switched to remote work, Ishibashi started living at the home of her partner in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture. The rental property is a 15-minute walk from JR Mishima Station and the rent of 65,000 yen includes parking. The fifty-five square meter rental is a two-room apartment with a dining kitchen area.



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When she opened the door to her home in Tokyo for the first time after about two months away, she felt dejected at the sight of the bed, desk, and sofa in the apartment. “The kitchen is small and there is no place to put any furniture for remote work. I can’t keep living here.”

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed her to move in with her partner on the spur of the moment. You can see Mt. Fuji from his house. When they went for walks in the area, he would look up at the sky and say, “It’s a full moon today.” Ishibashi had not thought about the shape of the moon for a while.

She comments, “I like shopping and I used to frequent Ginza and other shopping streets, but I no longer have any desire to consume. Instead, I go windsurfing with him on the Fuji Five Lakes, or camping at Nishi-Izu on the Izu peninsula. I have more time to be in contact with nature and to enrich my mind. I don’t think I want to go back to Tokyo for a while.”

In July 2020, Ishibashi canceled her lease on the apartment in Tokyo and moved to Mishima.

The appetite for migration to low density areas has increased as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic changed the way people work and this lies at the root of the migration fever. In the past, work presented the biggest barrier to rural migration, but the increase of remote work has made it possible to move to rural areas while continuing to work in the Tokyo area.

The authorized NPO Hometown Return Center in Chiyoda Ward, Tokyo (below, the Return Center), which has supported the migration of residents in urban areas since 2002, publishes an annual league table of locations where people want to move. In the 2020 survey, Shizuoka Prefecture came out on top for the first time.

President Takahashi Hiroshi of the Return Center comments, “With the increase in remote working, people don’t have to go to the office every day. Since they can live some distance away from Tokyo, there is a high demand for large houses where it is possible to set up one of the rooms for remote work. Regional cities with good transportation links within 100 to 150 kilometers of Tokyo have become more popular.”

Takahashi Ryosuke, staff member at the Urban Sales Section of the Public Relations and Public Affairs Division at Odawara, Kanagawa Prefecture, says, “Inquiries have more than doubled compared to the time before corona. We used to promote the proximity to Tokyo, which is about thirty minutes by bullet train and one hour by ordinary train, but I get the impression that we are a good match with the changes in working styles that were introduced with the COVID-19 pandemic. Odawara is set in a rich natural environment with the sea and the mountains nearby, and all commercial facilities are available in a compact area around the station. It seems that we have a sense of countryside that is just right for city people.”

Hirasawa Shozaburo (36), an employee of Biglobe, a major IT company, moved to Odawara in August 2020. Before moving, he paid 78,000 yen for a rented apartment (19 m<sup>2</sup>) located a ten-minute walk from the company, as he dislikes crowded trains. Since April 2020, he has only been to the office once a month due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Hirasawa’s primary job is to assist the sales staff with technical advice and to prepare cost estimates. Working remotely is not problematic as he is not on the frontlines of sales. While working in his tiny apartment, he decided to move as there was no point living close to the office anymore.

Hirasawa says that the most important issue when he made his decision was to have access to a station where the bullet train stops. “I have to go to the office once a month and I wanted to be somewhere where I could immediately get to Tokyo if something happened.”

By moving to Odawara, he doubled the size of his home and reduced his rent by 15,000 yen. Hirasawa is satisfied with his much improved work environment.



Odawara City, Kanagawa Prefecture  
Photo: thiyori/PIXTA

## Families with Small Children Are Leaving Tokyo

There is no end to the flight from Tokyo as a result of COVID-19. In May 2020 when the state of emergency was declared, there was a net migration loss for the first time since July 2013, a comparable time. June 2020 saw a net gain of migrants, but the net loss then continued from July 2020 to February 2021.

By age group, Tokyo had a net gain of people in their 20s even after COVID-19, while the generation of people in the 30–50 age group who are raising children, and the older population aged sixty and up are leaving metropolitan Tokyo. Of course, post-retirement migration didn't start with COVID-19, but the pandemic seems to be behind a net loss of families with young children. The context is dissatisfaction with the environment for raising children in Tokyo.

Yamamoto Yuji (36) works for a venture company in Tokyo. In August 2020, he and his wife Mio (32) and their two-year old son moved from Arakawa Ward in Tokyo to Kiryu City, Gunma Prefecture. The closest station is Akagi on the Tobu railway line, which is about a twenty-minute drive away. From there, you can catch the special express train and be at Kitasenju Station (Adachi Ward, Tokyo) in about 1 hour and 40 minutes.

After the state of emergency was declared, both husband and wife worked from home while their son's nursery school was temporarily closed. The child watched videos on his tablet upstairs all day as the parents were working. However, it proved impossible to amuse their son in the way they wanted to at home. In addition, every time they heard the sound of his feet upstairs, they felt anxious and had to check what he was doing.

“What kind of parents do we really want to be?” As the couple continued to talk, they realized that they wanted their son to experience real life and to develop and grow in a natural environment.”



Tobu train running in Kiryu City (left) and arriving at Kitasenju in Tokyo.  
Photos: tarosite/PIXTA

Mio had already been working mostly from home and after the pandemic, Yuji's place of employment canceled its office contract and shifted to a working style focused on remote work. The couple did not hesitate to move out of Tokyo, but they kept access to the city in mind. On moving day it was already dark by the time they had finished unloading the four-ton truck filled with their possessions. When they stepped out of the house to catch their breaths, their son looked at the sky and said, "The stars are so big."

Their son had been born in Tokyo and even though he had seen the moon, he had only seen stars in picture books. Then the boy started singing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. This is how Yuji recalls the moment, "My wife and I almost cried. Simply being in an environment where we could see the stars made the move worthwhile."



Big stars over the Kiryu City  
Photo: M8/PIXTA

In a complete reversal of their life in Tokyo, their new home is surrounded by rice paddies on all sides. They experience the changes in the seasons and are happy to see their son tearing around outside.

It is also much easier to go out on the weekends. “In Tokyo, we would put him in a stroller but even on the train, we had to pay attention to everything around us, so just getting from place to place was tiring. The countryside is a car society, so even if he is crying or acting up in the car, we don’t worry about it. With the car, we can also bring our shopping to the front door.”

## Trends Among Corona Migrants

Good access to Tokyo is an absolute must for corona migrants moving to rural areas while keeping their jobs in the Tokyo area. Their preferences are different from those of traditional migrants, who move back to their hometowns or to places that are completely new to them.

In fact, Nagano Prefecture has for ten consecutive years been among the top three in the rankings of desirable destinations compiled by the abovementioned Return Center, and the prefecture has also been the most popular one with migrants. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has not increased the popularity of the prefecture.

In fiscal 2019, 120 migrants received assistance from Iiyama when they relocated to the city in the northern part of Nagano Prefecture. In fiscal 2018, 109 people moved to the city, making it one of the most popular municipalities in Nagano Prefecture.

In addition to conventional relocation support, the city has tried to piggyback on the growing remote work movement under COVID-19 by equipping and furnishing housing for “[workations](#),” but the response has not been significant. The officer responsible for the Migration and Settlement Promotion Division of Iiyama City comments, “Movement is restricted because of COVID-19, and even if they are interested many people hesitate to come for a preview from Tokyo where the infection rate is high. Migration is a lifestyle transformation; it’s not like buying clothes or playing games on the Internet.”

Corona migration is not a nationwide movement. As we have seen so far, remote work migrants are keeping their jobs in the Tokyo area and moving to places that are within 60–90 minutes by train or car from Tokyo.

## “We Are Desperate To Have Them”

According to a questionnaire survey of 5,563 companies nationwide (the Nissay survey on business conditions) conducted by NLI Research Institute, a think tank associated with the major life insurer Nippon Life Insurance, 42% of companies headquartered in the Kanto region said that they are implementing remote work whereas only 29% of companies in the Kansai region are doing so. The national average is 25%, but there are large regional differences with the lowest figure of 9% in Tohoku.

Yamaguchi Katsumi, director of the Osaka Furusato Kurashi Information Center, which is the Return Center hub in Chuo Ward, Osaka, says that the number of migrants has hardly increased at all as a result of remote work. “In the case of Osaka, most people consider moving after losing their jobs. We need to reexamine what people who are considering relocating in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic are thinking, and we must do so without making hasty conclusions about COVID-19 and migration. We should think carefully about whether migration really is the solution.”

However, local governments adjacent to the Tokyo area, where remote work is popular, are desperate to attract migrants. A local official in a city with a population of less than 80,000 in the Northern Kanto region tells it as it is. “On the whole, corona migrants who move while keeping their jobs in the Tokyo area have higher incomes, so the municipal tax increases. They also enrich the town’s economy by living and consuming here. If the population increases, the tax allocated to local governments also increases. Even if we have to provide some services, we can recoup the costs immediately.”

Local governments cover the operational cost of providing administrative services and maintaining the health and cultural lives of local residents through local taxes, which pay the local government salaries, and through taxes allocated by the state.

The municipal tax accounts for the largest share of local taxes. The municipal tax is collected by the municipality where you are registered as a resident on the first of January. So even if you work in Tokyo, you pay taxes to the local government where you are resident. To avoid differences between prefectures, the standard municipal tax rate is fixed, but remote workers who have moved and kept their jobs in the Tokyo area have large incomes. As the previously mentioned local government official said, “We are desperate to have them.”

If tax revenues rise, services for residents improve and local governments are able to adopt independent policies. This is how Professor Mori Hiroyuki of Ritsumeikan University (public finance, urban political economy), an expert in local finances, explains it. “If the population decreases, both tax revenues and locally allocated taxes also decrease. About 70% of the criteria for calculating locally allocated taxes are related to the population. If local taxes increase, there is no corresponding decrease in locally allocated taxes. 75 % of local taxes are considered and managed as local government revenues, while the remaining 25% is reserved revenues.”

When people relocate for reasons of retirement, welfare and medical expenses rise, but there are no such concerns when people of the working generation relocate. Synergy effects such as starting up businesses and creating employment are also possible.

## **The Strong Points of Minakami in Gunma Prefecture**

Gunma Prefecture, which is adjacent to the Tokyo area, has been organizing Remote Prefecture events including online talk shows, consultations, and networking with local residents since August 2020. The prefecture is pioneering free healthcare for junior high school students and younger children, and there are few children on standby for daycare. The prefecture aims to attract families with children from the Tokyo area by highlighting access to the metropolis and a child-rearing environment amid nature.

Core cities in the prefecture with a population of more than 200,000 and good community facilities, such as Takasaki and Maebashi, are increasingly popular with corona migrants.

Some depopulated villages have also seen a rise in migrants since the COVID-19 pandemic. Minakami, a town with a population of about 18,000, is located at the northernmost tip of Gunma Prefecture. Surrounded by Tanigawadake, Hotakayama, and Shibutsusan, three of the 100 Famous Japanese Mountains, Minakami is a scenic town with eighteen hot springs including Minakami Onsengo, which is known as the “Kanto water bottle” since it is the source of the Tone, one of Japan’s three major rivers (Shinano, Tone, and Ishikari). The population has continued to decline since peaking at 35,696 in 1955 and the aging rate has reached 36.5% (FY2015), well above the national average. In the year since April 2020,

thirteen families (34 individuals) have moved from the Tokyo area to the town. Considering that four families (9 individuals) moved to the town in fiscal 2019, it is fair to say that the population is increasing rapidly.



Jomo-Kogen and Mt. Tanigawadake (Minakami Town in Gunma Prefecture)  
Photo: K,Kara/PIXTA

In addition to its rich natural environment, the town has another strong point. Jomo-Kogen Station on the Joetsu Shinkansen is within as little as sixty-six minutes' commuting distance of Tokyo Station. As one of its migration measures, the town set up the Minakami Shinkansen commuting subsidy in April 2019. People who keep their jobs in the Tokyo area and move to the town can receive a subsidy of up to 30,000 yen per month for a maximum of three years. The town also renovated the unused kindergarten and some old farm houses, and set up a remote work facility.

The Shinkansen commuting subsidy was reviewed in October 2020 amid the increase in remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At first, the subsidy had been intended for migrants who had commuter passes, but regular passenger tickets were also made eligible after the review. As a result of the increase in remote work, Kirin Holdings, ANA, Honda, and other major companies have shown some flexibility by successively abolishing their rates for commuter passes and switching to reimbursing the actual cost of transportation.

Minakami also subsidizes the cost of renovating vacant houses for migrants and provides support of up to one million yen for corporations.

## Town Hall Official Gives up His Free Time

However, this is not to say that such financial subsidies attract migrants. Shimizu Yusuke (34), who works for a major foreign-owned IT startup, moved to Minakami in December 2020 with his wife and two children. In October 2020, Shimizu had participated in an online consultation hosted by the town. After the event, an official from Minakami town hall approached him about continuing to exchange information on Facebook Messenger, so they exchanged contact details. At the invitation of the official, Shimizu decided to visit Minakami the day after the consultation. It was a Saturday and the town hall was closed, but the official picked him up at Jomo-Kogen Station. After sharing a meal of soba noodles, the official spent the rest of the day showing Shimizu around.

This is how Shimizu recalls the day. “I realized how pleasant it is to deal with an outstanding salesperson. I had told him in advance that I wanted to see some housing, but he even guided me around the interiors of several properties. It was very reassuring to meet people who had already moved to the town.”

Local governments struggling with population decline and the national government both welcome the flow of people away from Tokyo to rural areas. Thinking back, the Abe administration established the Headquarters for Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in Japan as the new control tower for depopulation countermeasures and regional revitalization in 2014, specifying in the Basic Policy for Economic and Natural Management and Structural Return that “the country will be able to maintain a population of about 100 million with a stable demographic structure in 50 years.” The highest priority was to correct the excess concentration of population and industry in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

But the net migration gain in the Tokyo area has not stopped. As of 2019, the government prepared a maximum one million yen relocation support grant and a maximum two million yen startup support grant for migrants from the twenty-three Tokyo wards, but as of the end of 2020 only 247 households (463 individuals) in thirty-eight prefectures had made use of the relocation support. As of 2021, remote work migrants have been eligible for the relocation support and encouraged to use the system.

## What Can Be Done in a Term of Three Years?

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to an existing migration support program set up by the government. The Local Vitalization Cooperator program was established in 2009 to attract people from the cities to rural areas and to secure human resources in rural areas where the population is aging and rapidly declining. By 2019, the number of cooperators had reached 5,503. The government plans to increase the number to 8,000 by fiscal 2024.

The government pays costs and the remuneration for the cooperator in the form of a special grant tax. As of 2021, the upper spending limit per cooperator is 2.7 million yen in wages and 2 million for other expenses. In most cases, the cost of vehicles and housing is covered as other expenses while the remuneration provides enough income to live on.

Located in Hyogo Prefecture, which borders on the Sea of Japan to the north and Kyoto Prefecture to the east, Toyooka, a city with a population of about 80,000, began hiring Local Vitalization Cooperators in fiscal 2014. In fiscal 2020, 132 persons applied for thirty roles. Oogishi Yuka at the Settlement Promotion Section of the Environment and Economy Division, Toyooka City, comments. “I think that clearly the COVID-19 pandemic is behind the significant rise in applications. I would like to see the town revitalized by interesting people, each with their own experiences of life in urban areas.”



Toyooka City, Hyogo Prefecture  
Photo: northsan/PIXTA

In August 2020, Kato Natsumi (25) moved to Toyooka to work as a Local Vitalization Cooperator performing planning and management related-work for the Toyooka Theater Festival. Theater is a compulsory subject at the Professional College of Arts and Tourism (President Hirata Oriza), which opened in Toyooka in April, and the town aims to develop into a theater town. After graduating from an art university in the Kansai area, Kato worked for a stage production company in Tokyo as a temporary employee, but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, performances were canceled one after another. He came across the invitation to apply for a post as a Local Vitalization Cooperator at a time when he had left the company without renewing his contract and with no plans for the future.

“I have always been interested in community-building, so I started writing my application the same day,” Kato recalls.

However, the term for a Local Vitalization Cooperator is fixed at maximum three years. Kato says that he is saving money and thinking about what he can do to achieve a permanent situation.

### **Toward Non-Face-to-Face Sales**

From August to September 2020, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism conducted a survey on the use of teleworking by listed companies headquartered in Tokyo (389 valid responses). They found that 26% of companies were exploring options for moving or reducing their head offices. The twenty-three wards of Tokyo topped the list of possible relocation destinations at 73% (multiple responses), while only 4% of respondents had considered regional areas. However, the survey in question targeted major listed

companies. As already noted, it is the IT venture companies that have changed the way they work. Even if vaccines are rolled out, corona migrants are convinced that there will be no return to pre-COVID-19 society.

I think many people used Zoom and other video conferencing services as remote work became embedded during the pandemic. However, in Japan where the rate of adopting inside sales (business negotiations using telephone, e-mail, and video conferencing systems) is low, the business of selling is generally premised on face-to-face contact, such as making appointments on the telephone, or dropping in on companies without an appointment.

But the COVID-19 pandemic is even changing the environment for sales.

bellFace (Shibuya, Tokyo), a company founded in 2015, develops bellFace, an online system specialized in sales. The system features auxiliary functions specially developed for sales, such as a synchronous presentation function that can be freely operated by both the host and the guest, and a memo function that can display the content of discussions. As of January 2020, the system had been deployed by 1,654 companies, but by December 2020, the number exceeded 3,000.



Higashikawa Town, Hokkaido  
Photo: smith/PIXTA

Shimizu Yuki (36), a bellFace employee, moved to Higashikawa in Kamikawa-gun, Hokkaido in December 2020. As general manager of business planning at the company, he is currently working on product development that combines the services of other companies with the services of bellFace.

Previously, he had worked without taking any holidays as COO of a venture company.

This is how Shimizu remembers those days. “Every day, I worked from morning till late at night and I only saw the face of my child asleep in bed. I tried remote work to spend more time with my family, but I was working in consulting at the time, and important business negotiations were basically done face-to-face because the other party would also send executive officers. So, it was too difficult and I gave up remote work.”

Shimizu started to explore a new way of life—working in the Tokyo area while living in a rural area—and decided to move to Higashikawa. Located in the center of Hokkaido, one part of the town is in the Daisetsuzan National Park, the largest national park in Japan. Before going ahead with the move, he even bought a piece of land located about ten minutes by car from Asahikawa Airport. It takes him about three hours to get to Tokyo.

Starting the job at bellFace in April 2019 was the main trigger for the move. Certainly, the move seemed feasible for someone committed to a business where the development and widespread use of technology would facilitate Shimizu's new way of life. After joining bellFace, Shimizu commuted to work from his home in Tokyo, but even then, 40–50% of his work was remote work from home. That's when the COVID-19 outbreak started. After the state of emergency, all employees worked remotely. As manager, Shimizu is in charge of subordinate staff at the company. He comments, "Working remotely all the time has not hindered productivity; on the contrary, the work is more thorough. If I stand next to you, I just give verbal instructions, but when I work remotely, I send instructions by text, which improves accuracy."

Shimizu was convinced that working remotely all the time is possible. At the end of May 2020, he started building a two-story house on the land he had purchased in Higashikawa, and in December 2020, he moved to the town to wait for the home to be completed.

"I thought times like these would come. When I was working from morning to night in Tokyo, everyone seemed to be enduring life. The crowded trains, the working hours, the salaries... In the future, companies will have to accommodate the workers. Otherwise, I don't think they will be able to recruit people."

In addition, Shimizu emphatically stated, "I want to be a role model for a new way of life."

## The Happy New Normal

After the corona outbreak, I also left Tokyo and relocated to Awaji Island in Hyogo Prefecture in June 2020. Awaji Island is close to my parents' home in Kobe, and I have long thought about collecting material on the agriculture, forestry and fisheries industry and local government. The COVID-19 pandemic made me decide to relocate. Similarly to the corona migrants introduced in this article, I mainly work for a publisher in Tokyo, but this is not a problem in terms of work as long as I have access to an environment that is suitable for remote work.

After I had moved, the Pasona Group, a leading HR services company, announced in August that it would shift the main functions of its headquarters to Awaji Island. At the time, several media outlets asked me to write articles about the migration to Awaji Island. I was astonished at the response when a short piece published in the news media outlet *BUSINESS INSIDER* in September 2020 rose to the top of the Yahoo! News traffic ranking on the day of publication. Seeing that so many people were interested in migration, I started to gather material on corona migrants for a book.

As I collected material, I was impressed by several people who said that they wanted to build small communities.

I understand the desire to escape the framework of Japanese society today. The corona migrants are the working generation in their 20s and 30s. They joined the workforce after the collapse of the economic bubble when the Lost Decade became the Lost Two Decades, and they experienced the Great East Japan Earthquake. Subsequently, the second Abe administration aimed to rebuild the Japanese economy through Abenomics, but ordinary people have not experienced a better life.



Awaji Island, Hyogo Prefecture  
Photo: mima/PIXTA

Both the government and businesses are aiming for unlimited growth in the name of economic progress, but is this really where happiness lies? The search for post-capitalism is constant, but it seems to me that the corona migrants are looking for the answers.

Will the migration fever turn out to be a transient boom? There seems to be an expectation that corona migrants, myself included, who have made the leap and moved to rural areas will lead the way to a happy new normal like the brave penguin that was the first to leave the colony and jump into the sea to catch fish.

*Translated from “Shizuoka, Kanagawa, Gunma, Hyogo, Hokkaido—Rimotowahku-jidai no Ijushatachi (Shizuoka, Kanagawa, Gunma, Hyogo, Hokkaido—Migrants in the Era of Remote Work),” Chuokoron, June 2021, pp. 38-47 (Courtesy of Chuo Koron Shinsha) [September 2021]*

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### **SAWADA Akihiro, journalist**

Editor-in-chief, *Kosotsu Shinro* (HrierLabo CO., Ltd.), a career support magazine for schools offering diversified education.

Sawada was born in Hyogo Prefecture in 1981. After dropping out of high school, he worked on construction sites, edited the *Weekly SPA!* magazine, and worked as a staff writer of *AERA* magazine before turning to freelancing. In June 2020, he moved from Ota Ward, Tokyo to Awaji in Hyogo Prefecture as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sawada mainly covers high school employment, foreign workers, primary industry, and local government. Publications include *Reportage: Technical Intern Trainees* and *Tokyo wo suteru korona iju no riaru* (Leaving Tokyo: the reality of corona migration).

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