For fifty years, research on rural Japan has been cast by the doomsday discourse on the devastating regional effects of outmigration, infrastructure decay and population aging (kaso chiiki). The negative assessment has been aggravated by newer key notions of ‘marginal settlements’ (genkai shūraku) and the ‘extinction of communities’ (chiiki shōmetsu), which forecast the decay of entire communities due to their increasing lack of self-governance. Cities, by contrast, seem to be more attractive due to the higher concentration of institutions and resources that enable them to excel over the countryside in terms of labor and employment opportunities, social welfare, health care, education and entertainment (Florida, Mellander and Rentfrow 2013; Gilbert, Colley and Roberts 2016). But there is no evidence that the general trend toward urbanization is paralleled by an overall increase in happiness: The scattered research on socio-spatial patterns of happiness fails to demonstrate that cities are beating villages in terms of quality of life and happiness of its inhabitants. “There are many benefits of big-city living; high levels of happiness are not among them” (Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011: 872).

My research on rural life in Japan challenges the master-narrative of rural decline by engaging in ethnographic fashion with local notions of happiness and the elements that make life worth living for those who stayed behind or moved into the countryside. My approach is situated in the tradition of the Vienna School of Japanese Studies, first of all by revisiting the same research site in southwestern Japan that Josef Kreiner and other researchers from Vienna chose in 1968 for the first-ever field research project in Japan by an European research team. Drawing back on data from the first and the current project, I adopt a long-term perspective to explore the aesthetics of rural happiness in the light of changing family and social relations, new mobilities and shifting moralities.