prayers. Christians, many of them ethnic Chinese, are only 3% of Central Java's 34m people, but Mr Sudirman says he has a "special interest" in listening to their worries, to counter claims that he wants to stir up the religious and ethnic tensions of Jakarta's election. "I have to prove I am not in that mood," he says.

However ecumenical his behaviour, it still seems unlikely that Mr Sudirman will prevail in Central Java. Jokowi hails from a town in the province. In 2014 he won 67% of the local vote. Flags emblazoned with the symbol of PDI-P, a red-eyed bull, are a common sight. Opinion polls are not always reliable in Indonesia, but the latest one puts Mr Ganjar, the incumbent, almost 70 percentage points ahead of Mr Sudirman. After all, points out Ari Setiawan, a 50-year-old with a wispy white beard eating a bowl of rice gruel at a roadside stall, "Central Java is the home of the red bull." But it could still provide some pointers for the opposition. ■

Rural Japan

Pining for the paddyfields

SHIMANTO

Not all Japanese towns and villages are atrophying

THERE was nothing wrong with Chika and Takeshi Ota's life in Osaka, Japan's liveliest city, where she worked as a shop manager and he as a driver. But a visit to Tasmania, in Australia, convinced Chika of the superiority of rural life. In May last year, with two tiny children in tow, they moved to Shimanto, a sprawling town in Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. Sitting in one of the sparse buildings that make up Kleingarten, a community of 22 basic houses with allotments they now call home, the couple, who are in their late 30s, describe how they hope to make a living through farming. "It is a risky choice, but we are happy," says Chika.

Japan's population is shrinking and ageing. Both trends are especially pronounced in the countryside, since young people tend to move to cities to find jobs, romance and good restaurants. The net inflow of Japanese to Tokyo rose from 96,500 in 2013 to 120,000 people last year, notes Ayumi Ito Rai of the cabinet office's department for revitalising local areas. The city's population continues to creep up. But there was net emigration from all but seven of Japan's 47 prefectures last year. The population of Kochi prefecture, where Shimanto sits, peaked in 1955 at 883,000. By 2015 it had fallen to 728,000.

But even as young country-dwellers seek their fortune in cities, a small but growing number of their urban counterparts are packing up and heading for the paddyfields. In the last nine months of 2017, 139 people settled in Shimanto, up from 73 in 2016 and 45 in 2015. There are no up-to-date nationwide statistics, but in 2017, 33,165 people contacted the Furusato Kaiki Shien Centre, an NGO supporting people who want to move to rural areas—a more than threefold increase on 2013.

It used to be older folk who headed to the countryside, often the retired returning to their childhood homes. Today those interested in moving are increasingly young. The trend is reflected in popular culture. Last year "Gifu ni iju", a TV drama, followed two women in their 30s who moved to Gifu, an area in central Japan full of small mountain towns. *Josei Seven*, a magazine for young women, recently wrote about moving to the countryside. All but one of the 73 people who moved to Shimanto in 2016 were under 50.

That is good news for the receiving towns and villages. A report in 2014 suggested that by 2040 depopulation would wipe out nearly 900 municipalities, almost half the total. That panicked the government. The next year Shinzo Abe, the prime minister, set out a plan to revive dying areas, one pillar of which was encouraging migration.

The rustic revival is thanks in part to public programmes, such as one that sends young people to work in rural areas for two or three years, in the hope they will then settle. Also important, says Tokumi Odagiri of Meiji University, were the earthquake and tsunami in 2011, which killed some 18,000 people. The disasters "caused young people to re-evaluate their lives", he says. Many are looking for peace and quiet, or simply cheaper homes. Another draw is better work-life balance, says Junichi Yanagi of *Living in the Countryside* magazine.

Young people can revitalise an area, says Nakao Hironari, the mayor of Shimanto. In part, that is because they work. Many go into farming or learn traditional crafts. Yu and Miki Kikuchi left their jobs as a factory worker and a nurse; he is now training to be a blacksmith, while she hunts game.

It helps that young people are the ones who have babies, too. Shimanto offers subsidised child care and housing for new arrivals. In contrast, Yoshiro Yamauchi, a pensioner who three months ago moved from Saitama, a city of 1.3m close to Tokyo, to Hirado, a town of 31,000 on the island of Kyushu, says: "It's pretty run down here, and you only really see old people."

Mr Odagiri says government policies to combat depopulation focus on infrastructure and subsidies, or on deterring people from moving to the cities. Instead, he says, research shows that people are attracted to areas where there is a positive mood and a sense of community. That creates a virtuous cycle, as immigration begets more immigration. In Shimanto, at least, that cycle may be taking off. After living there for three years, Naofumi Takase, who is 31, is planning to start a bed-and-breakfast business. Mayu Kase, 22, who left her job as a hotel receptionist in Chiba, an area east of Tokyo, wants to open a cake shop. "I love it here," she says. ■

Some towns are blossoming