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Shrinking Sado

Education, Employment and the Decline of Japan's Rural Regions

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Photo: The view over the Japan Sea towards Sado Island at sunset. Taken by the author from the campus of Niigata University in November 2004.

Author Biography

Dr Peter Matanle is Lecturer in Japanese Studies at the National Institute of Japanese Studies and School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield, UK. He gained his doctorate from Sheffield in 2001 and since then has been researching and publishing in the sociology of work in Japan. His recent work includes a comparison of working attitudes among Japanese and British younger people and an investigation into the circumstances surrounding work, education and population decline in Sado Island. He is the author of various publications, including *Japanese Capitalism and Modernity in a Global Era* (Routledge, 2003), and is co-editor with Wim Lunsing of *Perspectives on Work, Employment and Society in Japan* (Palgrave, 2006). He is also the founder and general editor of the *electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies* (www.japanesestudies.org.uk).

ピーター マタンリー：英国国立日本研究所及び英国シェフィールド大学東アジア研究所、日本研究講師。同大学にて2001年博士号取得後、労働社会学の分野において日本研究、出版活動を行っている。最近の研究には、若年層の仕事に対する態度・考え方の日英比較、佐渡島における職業・教育・人口減少に関する調査などがある。幅広い執筆活動を行っており、近著には‘Japanese Capitalism and Modernity in a Global Era’ (Routledge, 2003), ‘Perspectives on Work, Employment and Society Japan’ (Palgrave, 2006) (Wim Lunsing と共編・著)などがある。電子ジャーナル‘electronic journal of contemporary japanese studies’ (www.japanesestudies.org.uk) の創設者・監修者でもある。

Shrinking Sado

Education, Employment and the Decline of Japan's Rural Regions

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Abstract

In 2005 Japan's population began to shrink and, according to the government's own research institute,¹ is scheduled to drop by approximately 30 per cent within the next 50 years. Although this fall is considered to be a rather recent phenomenon, what is less well known is the fact that Japan's rural regions have been steadily declining, perhaps even collapsing, since as far back as 1950. This population shrinkage, and the inevitable decline in socio-economic vitality that accompanies it, has been taking place as a result of an excessive concentration of economic opportunity and political power in Japan's urban centres. Japan's cities have grown in the post-war period, in part, at the expense of a long-term decline of the countryside. This article uses Sado Island as a case study in rural decline and argues that a chronic and structured out-migration of younger people from the island to urban areas in search of education and employment opportunities has been a major cause of this decline. To the extent that what has already taken place in Japan's rural areas may be indicative of the shape of things to come for the country's provincial towns and cities, as the population fall begins to bite more deeply, the article then goes on to systematise these processes within the larger context of the acceleration and intensification of the processes underpinning Japanese capitalism. The article will propose that, in addition to its ongoing exhaustion of nature, Japanese capital is exhausting the country's labour power and, consequently, its population. Part of the solution to the exhaustion of labour and nature may be for us to think beyond modernity into a post-capitalist order. Thus, rather than being seen as a dying relic of the country's past, this article will suggest that the society of Sado Island may assist us in imagining and planning a new direction for Japan.

¹ The National Institute for Population and Social Security Research estimates that Japan's population will fall from 127.7 million in 2005 to approximately 89.9 million in 2055, representing a fall of 29.6 per cent (Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūjo, 2006).

Shrinking Sado

Education, Employment and the Decline of Japan's Rural Regions

Introduction

Japan's demographic decline is sometimes assumed to be a rather recent phenomenon, or at least is thought to be something that did not become a pressing issue until the late 1990s and 2000s. Yet, if we start to disentangle the relationship between society, nation, and country, what will become apparent is that Japan's rural society has been steadily declining, perhaps even collapsing, for several decades already. Thus, despite the fact that many Japanese towns and cities have only recently started to suffer a hollowing out of their social and economic vigour as their populations shrink, many rural areas have been experiencing such difficulties for several decades. In this sense, therefore, it is essential that we study and analyse the post-war experiences of Japan's rural areas, since what has already happened there may be an indication of the shape of things to come for the country's provincial towns and cities as their decline deepens in the coming decades. This article will argue that, to the extent that population shrinkage in Japan has sociological roots, a major cause of rural decline has been the structured subordination of rural life to the demands of the urban centre. In this respect it is no exaggeration to suggest, as John Knight (2000: 341) does, that Japan's rural areas have been, at least during the post-war era, a mere 'derivative space wholly subordinate to the megalopolis'.

One such rural area, Sado Island, lies approximately 20 kilometers off the north-western coast of Honshu in the Sea of Japan. Part of Niigata Prefecture, it is Japan's sixth largest island, though it is now considered by most Japanese to be a remote, forgotten and rather inhospitable corner of their country. However, this was not always the case. Possessing what was for the time the third largest gold mine in the world, during the Edo period Sado was one of Japan's most dynamic regions and was the source of much of the Edo government's wealth. Thus, whereas in 2005 there were just 8,599 people living in the village of Aikawa (Sado-shi 2006), where the mine is located, there were more than 100,000 residents during the height of the mine's operations.² Many of these were criminals and vagrants transported forcibly to Sado in order to work in the mine's appalling conditions. Some, however, were professionals and artisans, such as temple priests and makers of clay ventilation pipes, who had migrated there to take advantage of some of the opportunities that the mine afforded.

Although the gold mine has long since ceased production, contrary to many people's assumptions, today Sado possesses a large historical, cultural, and economic endowment, and once one is made aware of just how abundant this inheritance is, it becomes puzzling as to why the island's population and society have declined so precipitously since the 1950s. This inheritance includes a rich arts and crafts heritage,

² The figure for Edo period Aikawa was quoted from an interview with an official of the prefectural branch office in Sado Island.

including ceramics, that has consistently been recognised as being among the finest in Japan; an internationally renowned performing arts culture, including the highest density of Noh theatres in Japan and the world famous Kodo *taiko* drumming group who are resident in Sado year round, and who have performed in and organised the Earth Celebration festival in the town of Ogi every August since 1987; stunning natural scenery, including dramatic coastlines, mountains, and forests; and some of the highest quality agricultural and marine produce to be found in Japan. It is remarkable, therefore, that in the post-war period, the population of Sado has steadily fallen from its peak of 125,597 people in 1950, to the 2005 figure of 67,384 (Sado-shi 2006a), representing a drop of 46 per cent in the intervening 55 years. Furthermore, if we extrapolate from current trends, it is likely that Sado's population will fall to around 35,000 people by about 2030, which would mark a total decline of approximately 75 per cent within the space of three generations; a collapse by anybody's standards.

Before proceeding to describe the rest of this article, I wish to make clear that this article does not argue against population decline per se, since throughout human history populations have increased and decreased and this is an inevitable consequence of changes in their circumstances. Certainly, and in concert with radical changes in consumption behaviour, a population decrease has the potential to place fewer pressures on an already depleted natural environment (Caldararo 2003 and Economist 2006). Thus, it is not the decline itself that is problematic but, first, the imbalances that it is causing in Japan's socio-economy and, second, what the current decline indicates about the long-term sustainability of capitalist modernity in Japan and the rest of the post-industrial world. Accordingly, what I wish to argue here is that, by combining Japan's continuing low birth rate with the exhaustion of domestic rural labour power, Japan's demographic decline is now at a more radical stage in its progression and that this has profound consequences for the future capability of the Japanese people to sustain their way of life and, at the same time, deal successfully with the increasingly severe consequences of the worldwide exhaustion by capitalism of nature's ability to reproduce itself.

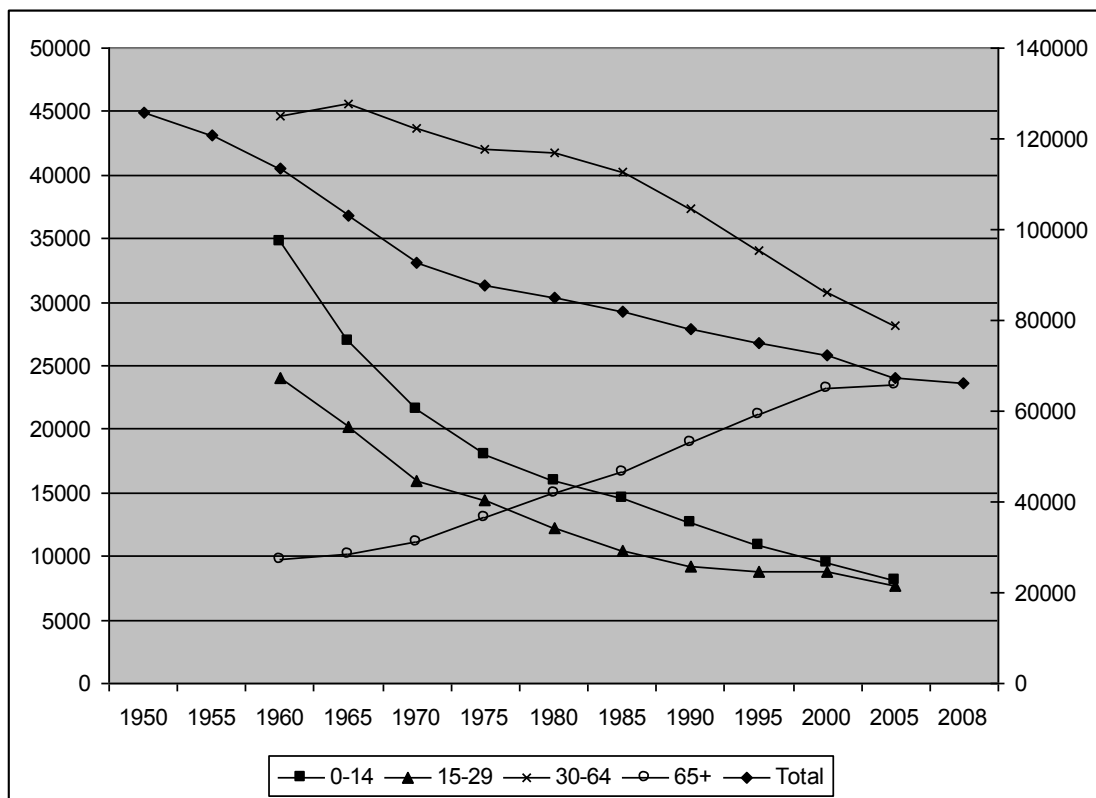
Although the sources of demographic decline are notoriously difficult to disentangle, after first presenting the extent of Sado Island's population shrinkage, I will argue that the major reason for Sado Island's population decrease, and the erosion of the island's vitality, has been a chronic out-migration of younger people to Japan's urban centres in search of educational and employment opportunities.³ I will follow this by describing and analysing Sado's circumstances in the context of Japan's overall shrinkage. I will argue that Japan's, and Sado Island's, demographic decline is a consequence of the exhaustion of Japan's labour power by the continued expansion and acceleration of the capitalist process. The article concludes by suggesting that part of the solution to this problem may be to start to think beyond modernity and to imagine and plan for what a post-capitalist society might look like. In this sense we might want to think of Sado Island, and its historical and cultural inheritance, as an example for Japan's future rather than, as is more commonly the case, a dying relic of its past.

³ A more comprehensive account of the circumstances surrounding the decline of Sado Island's population can be found in Matanle (2006).

Sado Island's Population Decline

Figure 1 below plots Sado's population from a comparatively stable pre-war level of approximately 110,000 people, through its post-war peak of 125,597 people in 1950, to the 2005 figure of 67,384. The graph shows that the population decline since 1960 is partly due to a decrease in the number of younger people, while the decline among middle aged people also shows a long term fall which has accelerated in recent years. Whereas Sado's decline has its roots both in a declining birth rate and a chronic out-migration of younger people to urban areas in search of educational and employment opportunities, it is the latter which has the most serious consequences for the future since, even if the birth rate can be raised, it is only by younger people remaining can there be any hope of the island's society regaining its vigour. Indicative of the significance of this out-migration is the steepness of the main curve below, which showed its most rapid decline during the 1960s. This was the decade often referred to as the *keizai kōdō seichō-ki*, or era of high speed economic growth, when Japan's economy was expanding at its most rapid pace and when Japanese companies were recruiting entry level employees most actively from rural areas like Sado. Figure 1 also shows that, currently, the over-65 age group is the only one that is increasing and from 2007, as the post-war baby-boom generation retires and passes away, this group will reach its peak and begin to turn downwards. Indeed, the slight downward steepening of the Sado population curve between 2000 and 2005 may be a forewarning of the effects of this expectation on the whole island's future demography.

Figure 1: Population of Sado Island 1920-2005 (Total population and by age group)



Sources: Niigata-ken (2005a) and Sado-shi⁴ (2006a).

Note: Figures for the 29-64 age group were calculated by subtracting the 14-29 age group from the 14-64 age group in the Sado-shi data. The population of Sado Island at the time of the national census in 2005 was estimated to be 67,384, a drop of 4,789 (6.6%) people from 2000 (Sado-shi 2006a) (Sado figures taken from the National Census).

To put the above figures into their national context, we should note that the 46 per cent decrease in Sado's population from 1950 to 2005 occurred at the same time as the population of Japan as a whole expanded by 51 per cent, from approximately 84 million to 127.5 million (Statistics Bureau 2004: 11 and 2006). Given that the birth rate in Japan was either higher than or equal to the population replacement rate throughout the long post-war economic expansion, when the national population was climbing and rural population declining, we can deduce that while Japan's urban areas increased dramatically in their size and vigour, they did so partly at the expense of a long term contraction in the vitality of Japan's rural areas. Why did the rural population contract so sharply over the post-war era? In the next section I will argue that one major reason for the decline of Sado Island's and rural Japan's populations has been a chronic out-migration of younger people to the urban centre in search of educational and employment opportunities.

The Push and Pull of Rural Out-Migration

Local education and the national economy

⁴ Sado City is the English translation of Sado-shi and refers to the local administrative entity of Sado Island. In 2004 the 10 local authorities of the island were merged to form a single Sado City. The word 'city' does not refer to the place's character, but to the local administrative unit.

It has been well known for some time that, in the delivery of curricula, education at all recognised pre-tertiary institutions in Japan must conform to strict instructions issued from the Ministry of Education in Tokyo. All classroom textbooks must be pre-approved by the ministry and then selected from a group of approved texts by local boards of education. These texts are national in scope, sometimes nationalist in tone, almost invariably focus on modern and national developmentalist objectives, and hardly address issues specific to Sado Island in particular or rural Japan in general. In addition to formal control by the ministry, subjects available for study and their content are heavily prescribed by the structure and content of university entrance exams and, thus, time available for digressing from teaching to the text-book in order to focus on local issues is restricted by Japanese schools' exam preparation centred pedagogy. Although attempts to encourage a greater rootedness in time and space amongst the children in rural schools do appear from time to time, these are few in number, are isolated and disconnected from one another, and remain peripheral to the mainstream of education policy and practice in Japan.

It is also well known that, where employment is concerned, Japanese society has for many decades placed a strong emphasis on educational credentials in preparation for attaining secure jobs under the so-called 'lifetime employment system' (Ishida, Spilerman, and Su 1997; Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Takeuchi 1997; Yano 1997). This emphasis has been strongly bolstered throughout the post-war era by the Japanese government through its education and employment policies and by Japan's largest employers, who have been keen to recruit the best and the brightest from Japan's schools and universities. Although regional artists and craftsmen entrepreneurs, for example, correctly occupy a distinguished position in Japanese material culture and are well known and admired worldwide, on the whole Japanese society has preferred to guide children towards being accepted into what are regarded as the best universities and thence secure employment in the most prestigious work organizations, nearly all of which are located within the vast megalopolises of the Kanto and Kansai plains. In this way, younger people's lives are structured towards following this normative pattern from an early age, wherever they come from, and each new generation of parents, teachers, and students then reproduces and reinforces, or structurates, this life-path for the succeeding generation. Research produced by the Niigata Prefectural government bears out these arguments. Since 1980, the two principle reasons cited by younger people for leaving the prefecture have been for reasons of education and employment, with employment being the reason cited by more than 50 per cent of respondents in recent years. The prefecture cites both harsh employment conditions in the prefecture and better employment conditions in Tokyo as the principle push and pull factors (Niigata-ken 2005b: 10-11). Indeed, Suda, Ohtsuka and Nishida (1988) in their research described how rural-urban migration in search of salaried employment has been the principal reason for outward migration from Japanese rural areas since the 1960s. This process is both a consequence of and a contributory factor towards an over-concentration of socio-economic opportunity and political power in

two or three urban centres, that itself is dependent upon the continued supply of labour power from the regions.

One manifestation of this extreme concentration and dependency has been that rural societies have been denied access to the resources they need to be able to develop socio-economic and political independence from the centre such that indigenous forms of human and social capital can reproduce themselves sustainably. While local and regional efforts at independent identity creation through the laying down of cultural markers abound,⁵ all too often local educational institutions fail to capitalise on these and continue to emphasise national developmentalist goals at the expense of cultivating local socio-economic and cultural autonomy. An example of this can be found in the relative roles of educational, familial and community institutions in the reproduction of Sado Island's ceramic arts industry. Many ceramic artists in Sado Island reported to me in interview that over the course of the long population fall in Sado Island, families and communities involved in the ceramics industry have found it difficult to pass on their skills, knowledge and networks to succeeding generations because the local educational regime focuses on national developmental objectives rather than local sustainability. Rather than invest resources in assisting students to gain viable employment in indigenous occupations, local schools concentrate on teaching standard academic subjects as preparation for entering universities and achieving secure regular employment in urban industrial, commercial and professional roles. It is a strategy which simultaneously requires younger people to move away from Sado in search of opportunities to sustain themselves, and excludes them from being able to take up challenging and fulfilling jobs in their local areas, even if they wish to. Consequently, fewer and fewer children possess the motivations, aptitudes, and knowledge necessary for inheriting the accumulated capital of previous generations of ceramicists in order to carry on the island's industry.

However, educators at local schools, when challenged about the potential for educational institutions to assist families and communities in preparing younger people for the reproduction of the indigenous socio-economy, admitted that they did not feel a sufficiently deep sense of responsibility to the island's heritage, by responding that it remained the role of families to prepare children to carry on what are essentially family businesses. Thus, again in the village of Aikawa, since the 1970s the number of ceramic kilns has dropped substantially, falling from more than 30 kilns to just 17 still in operation today, with many of these teetering on the brink of closure because there is no-one presently in place who is being groomed to inherit the business. A teacher at a Sado middle school had this to say about ceramics education in Sado.

No, I don't think there is a kiln [at any of our schools]. At least, I think one or two schools may have a small metal [electric] kiln for occasional use, but there isn't one ... a climbing kiln [*noborigama*]. ... Pottery needs an enthusiastic teacher to teach it and our school is very small. We

⁵ See, for example, Rausch (2004).

have only 20 or so students [in the school] and this has dropped from more than 50 students about ten years ago when it was built. There is only one technology and one art teacher. It depends on who we have as to what we can teach. ... Yes, I think that it is odd [not to have a kiln], because pottery has been important in Sado for a long time. ... pottery is a family business and families train the next generation in the traditional manner. Also, this is not a pottery making area like Aikawa. However, I hear that in Aikawa [middle school] the students study woodcut printing rather than pottery in their art classes because there is a famous teacher there. Come to think of it, that is a bit strange. ... We have not yet started work experience classes [*shokuba taiken*] but we are going to start that from next year. I hope that we can take some students to a pottery at that time. In the meantime there are one or two places where students can experience it for a day. ... Yes, I agree that it is not really long enough for students to get to know it.

Local employment circumstances

In almost every interview I conducted in Sado with local residents and workers I was told that there are few local employment opportunities awaiting the younger people of the island as they grow up and graduate from the island's schools, and that this was the main reason for out-migration to urban areas. Yet, as I show below, the unemployment rate on the island is lower than both the regional and national averages. This is what a local man says about the employment situation.

Everyone always says that there is no work in Sado Island, but most of them have a job [laughs]! ... I am a car mechanic and I really love fishing. I am 30 years old and I worked for a few years in Naoetsu in the south of Niigata. But it wasn't interesting. I wanted to come back to Sado as I really love this island. So I bought a fishing boat and now I have two jobs. I have recently taken on an apprentice [*deshi*] on my boat. ... winter is the best season for fishing as the fish are especially tasty at this time. It's very cold at sea and I can understand why few people want to do it. You have to really love it. Most of my school year group went away to the big cities. Some come back for the summer *obon* festival and for New Year, and they say how they miss living here and how they don't have good jobs ... but they don't want to do this work either.

A local official has the following to say about younger people's employment prospects, and their attitudes towards the jobs that may await them.

The reason that most young people leave to go elsewhere is that there are very few jobs in Sado Island for them these days. They don't want to work in agriculture, forestry and fishing because these are hard jobs which produce only a low income. Young people think of these jobs as being

like the famous '3K' jobs, which means jobs that are dirty, difficult, and dangerous.⁶ If they could gain a higher income, maybe some people might do it. ...

As of 2000 there were 62,702 persons over 15 years of age resident in Sado Island. Of these, 64.1 per cent (62.4% for Niigata Prefecture) were counted as being active. Of the latter, only 1.9 per cent (3.8%), or 768 persons, were completely unemployed, 82.8 per cent (83.2%) were working in the formal economy, and 13.6 per cent (10.9%), were involved in home-making or other types of informal work.⁷ Of those actively engaged, 7,626 people, or 22.7 per cent (12.0%), were self-employed and the rest were employees (Niigata-ken 2005a: 317). Employment in the primary industries of agriculture, forestry, and fishing halved between 1980 and 2000, while employment in secondary and tertiary industries has remained fairly steady. This reflects the fact that a large number of people involved in primary industries on the island are older people and they are retiring and passing away now in greater numbers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that since 2000 there has been a fall in employment in secondary and an expansion in tertiary industries, as the population falls and ages, and the continuing harsh local economic climate bites more deeply.

While manufacturing employment in Sado did not decrease between 1980 and 2000 the number of manufacturing establishments fell steadily over the period 1991 to 2001 by a factor of 26 per cent (Sado-shi 2006b). Figures for all industries show that between 1994 and 2002 the number of small businesses on the island fell by 18 per cent to 1,436 establishments, and the number of people employed at these fell by 11 per cent to 5,705 employees, showing that employment is gradually becoming more concentrated in larger businesses, with many of these headquartered outside the island. Over the same period turnover had fallen by 12 per cent (JPY86 million or USD750,000) to an average of 123.5 billion yen per business. The number of small retail stores also fell by 19 per cent, while the number of retail subsidiaries and franchises dropped by only 9 per cent, leaving the total fall in retail stores at 18 per cent, with retail subsidiaries, again with many of these headquartered outside the island, increasing their proportion. One consequence of this gradual shift in business ownership from Sado residents to those outside of the island is that a steadily increasing proportion of employment opportunities are in low-wage, low-skilled, insecure temporary and part-time employment with few prospects for onward progression.

Push and pull

Given the evidence and arguments presented herein, rural out-migration might therefore more usefully be seen as a combination of both push and pull. The former is represented principally by an education system that fails to encourage sufficient numbers of younger people from taking up employment in the region, as

⁶ 3K refers to *kitanai*, *kitsui*, *kiken*; or dirty, difficult and dangerous.

⁷ The data does not add up to 100 per cent. It is possible that the remaining 704 people who are active but not included in the more detailed figures are so-called NEETs, or those Not in Employment, Education, or Training (See Genda 2004).

well as declining employment opportunities in occupations in which younger people wish to be employed, and the latter by more numerous and more attractive employment, education, and lifestyle choices being available in Japan's urban centres. Unsurprisingly, it seems that younger people are not happy to engage in work that they feel requires hard physical labour in poor conditions for poor financial returns, work that provides few opportunities for personal growth and independence, or work that involves working long and inconvenient hours.

More alarming still, younger people migrating from rural areas have recently begun to face more difficult employment prospects in regions they wish to move to. Stable and skilled manufacturing employment has been fast disappearing in Japan's urban areas as China becomes the centre of world manufacturing, and is being replaced by unskilled, insecure, underwhelming, and sometimes nocturnal service employment, often in the retail and restaurant trades (Honda 2006; Genda 2005; Genda and Maganuma 2004). In this respect it is significant that, in addition to there being almost no tertiary level education in Sado, investment in pre-tertiary education is running at about half the average for Niigata Prefecture as a whole. In 2004 public investment in education in Sado stood at 586,621 yen per primary level child and 507,395 yen for middle school, as against 1,023,423 yen and 1,063,588 yen respectively for the prefecture as a whole (Sado-shi 2006c).

Thus, in addition to local opportunities for younger people becoming increasingly unattractive as rural society declines and disintegrates, since the graduates of Sado's schools are among the least likely to have the background and resources to be able to enter Japan's elite higher educational institutions, and the structure of the labour force has been changing rapidly in favour of a more precarious, globalised, and service oriented employment system, in all likelihood the employment prospects awaiting many of the young people who move away from rural areas are not what they used to be. In the next section I will put the above described developments within the context of the demographic decline of Japan as a whole.

The National Context

In her bold critique of modern capitalism, the late Teresa Brennan (2000) described an entrenched system in which the cultures and psychologies of modernity and capitalism are the principal obstacles to achieving human and environmental renewal and, consequently, a sustainable future for the world. In this description, capital cannot wait for either labour power or nature to reproduce themselves before they are alienated, transformed, commodified, and sold, thus progressively depleting the world of the means for its long-term survivability. Accordingly, once local sources of labour and nature become exhausted, or are rendered too expensive to generate exchange value, capital reproduces itself either by importing materials and labour from afar, or by shifting production to where materials, labour and product markets are available, until these sources also become exhausted and the process begins anew.

Similarly, Immanuel Wallerstein (2001) describes a world in which profound transformations are taking place in the material conditions of life and the structures of knowledge that underpin it. Like Brennan, Wallerstein is not optimistic, demonstrating that capital will eventually exhaust the earth in its pursuit of more competitive cost regimes, both by driving down the conditions necessary for sustaining life within its own domain and by bringing previously unexploited domains under its regime. Wallerstein's thesis is that this process is finite and nearing its end, as human society's and the earth's capacity for absorbing capitalism's contradictions are stretched to their limit. For Wallerstein, the fundamental problem that we face is that of the probable and eventual 'end of the world as we know it'. Published in 2001, the book predicts that we will reach this state within the next 50 years, or by 2051.

Brennan's examination of the deep psychology and structure of modern capitalism is especially insightful because of her development of the concept of 'energetic' channels existing at all levels of human activity; within the human mind; in social, political, and economic institutions and structures; in the geography and history of capitalism and modernity; and the accelerating speed with which negative energy flows down those channels. Brennan shows how hard it is to carve new channels to successfully challenge the accelerating mechanisms of world capitalism and, simply put, for us to slow down, down-size, and change direction. In short, we are stealing from our descendants in order to maintain our present way of life and, eventually, either we will have to change, or the earth will become, in the words of James Lovelock (2006: 147); 'Hell: so hot, so deadly that only a handful of the teeming billions now alive will survive'.

While efforts at sustainable living are taking place in Japan, they are few in number and are isolated and disconnected. Laudable though these are, they have little effect on the direction of development of mainstream society. The majority of Japanese continue to live a conventional life according to the normative cultures of modernity and they remain comfortably corralled within the institutions of Japan's post-war capitalist regime. Yet, as we have seen above in the case of the severe socio-economic imbalances being created by demographic decline and rural-urban migration, it is here where reform for positive generativity is most urgently required. In this sense we can talk about the existence in Japan of a national developmentalist regime, what Chalmers Johnson called the 'developmental state' (2001: 10), whereby Japan's post-war elites sought to include the whole nation under a long term umbrella strategy of national economic development in order to 'catch-up' (Katz, 1998) with the advanced western economies. Rural areas such as Sado Island were brought within this regime because they could supply large numbers of literate, numerate, diligent, and disciplined – some would say docile – young workers to Japan's burgeoning corporations and factories on a regular basis. During the post-war decades, normative understandings of the relative roles of siblings, and having multiple children families, made sure that the demands of this national developmentalist regime could be satisfied while preserving much of the social capital and cohesion of local areas, because the eldest sons, or daughters, would be available to remain at home or would return after being recalled to take over the family land or

business on their parents' retirement. Even as the population of Tokyo and other urban areas expanded greatly during the long post-war economic expansion, the population of Niigata Prefecture remained steady at around 2.4 million people (Niigata-ken 2005a), thus enabling at least the appearance of a stable rural-urban migratory relationship to develop.

However, the stability of this relationship and, especially, its long-term sustainability has always been illusory. For, if we adopt the dominant neo-liberal narrative that describes labour power as a resource (to be exploited), as capital likes to do by adopting the term 'human resources', when we look at the population statistics and examine the state of rural society we can see that this resource bargain between urban capital and rural labour has all but been mined out by Japan's huge corporations. Even the eldest sons and daughters now leave Sado permanently for elsewhere, the remaining residents have few or no children, and native Japanese labour power becomes more costly to urban employers due to its increasing scarcity. The accelerating rate of capitalist expansion in Japan means that Japan's corporations cannot wait for rural human resources to reproduce themselves and they now concentrate on shifting their production facilities overseas in search of lower cost regimes; a process that has recently been termed 'globalization'.⁸

It can be said, therefore, that Japan's post-war modernity has served as a giant mechanism for corralling younger people away from local sources of knowledge and skill, and then herding them into the urban centre where they can be sorted for employment within the country's vast industrial and commercial complex according to their perceived academic status (McVeigh 2000 and 2002; Okano and Tsuchiya 1999; Takeuchi 1997; Yano 1997). However, while serving the needs of the elites' national developmentalist project well throughout the post-war period, especially since generations of rural young people were able to gain secure, skilled, and well paid employment in manufacturing industry, these institutions may not be so well suited to the problems being experienced in local areas, as well as the transformations occurring in the urban labour force. While local family systems appeared resilient enough through the early post-war decades, and were the central institutional mechanism for the reproduction of the rural economy, this resilience has now become seriously degraded by the centrifugal economic forces emanating out of Tokyo and other areas, which continue to draw in the energy and vitality upon which rural economies depend for their survival and reproduction. Add to this an educational system that has consistently focused on national developmentalist objectives at the expense of rural sustainability and has failed so far to replace the decline of the family as a mechanism for local socio-economic reproduction. Finally, the urban employment opportunities that rural migrants could rely on are declining year by year as Japan's economy restructures and manufacturing employment is out-sourced to China and the rest of Asia. The result is that many younger people from rural areas such as Sado Island are eventually compelled to take up employment within the postmodern netherworld of service stations, roadside convenience stores, and fast food outlets that characterise Japan's vast suburban sprawls.

⁸ See Bunker and Ciccantel (2005) for a more comprehensive exposition of this theory.

Conclusion

I started this article by introducing the society of Sado Island as an example of rural population decline and then went on to show the extent to which the population has fallen since its post-war peak in 1950. In this way I was able to show that Japan's demographic decline is not a recent phenomenon, as it is sometimes considered, but is something that has been going on for many decades already. I then went on to show that a major factor in the decline of the island's population, and erosion of its society's vigour, has been the outward migration of younger people to urban areas in search of educational and employment opportunities. Lastly, I drew these issues together, and explained their significance, by locating Sado Island's situation within the context of Japan's overall demographic decline and through a theoretical discussion and analysis of the role of Japanese capitalism in exhausting the nation's labour power.

A basic condition for any society's stability and continued prosperity is its ability to reproduce itself biologically such that succeeding generations may support both their children and elders through their labour power. This condition is disintegrating in Japan as its population decline enters a new and more radical stage in its progression. This can be characterised by combining the two processes of demographic exhaustion, a low birth rate and outward migration of younger people from rural areas, within a single conceptual framework. In this way, Sado Island is an example, by no means unusual in Japan, of the steady exhaustion by capital of rural society's ability to sustain itself and provide the surplus labour, or 'industrial reserve army', on which the modern centralized industrial state depends. The increasing cost and scarcity of domestic labour is a significant underlying cause for inward migration from overseas and for the outward globalization of Japanese industry as it seeks to drive down the costs of maintaining domestic structures and to bring lower cost regimes in other parts of the world under its control; a process that has recently been termed 'globalization'. However, this process is finite and will reach its limits within the coming decades. Under current trends Japan's demographic exhaustion will continue such that population decline on a scale similar to that already experienced by Sado Island is a realistic probability for the country as a whole, and is indeed already happening in many of Japan's regional towns and cities. Coming at the same time as Japan and the world are threatened by some of the most serious existential crises in history, in the form of climate change and increasingly dangerous global political and ideological divisions, together these problems represent the beginnings of a systemic tilt that will see enormous stresses being placed on Japanese society. To the extent that the experiences of Japan's rural areas are the shape of things to come for the country's provincial towns and cities as they too suffer a hollowing out of their socio-economic vitality as their populations shrink, it is worth studying and analyzing the causes of rural decline in order to understand its underlying dynamics and to work towards discovering ways of mitigating or, even, reversing them.

Rather than taking the conventional approach and appreciating Sado Island as a dying relic of the past, the island and its society may have the potential for being the quintessential postmodern society, and an example for all of our futures. In this sense, there may be two routes available into the future for Japan. One is the continuation of rural society's surrender to the dictates of the centre; in other words a capitulation to the demands of an ecologically unsustainable and resolutely modern model of capitalism. The other is to transcend, or even overcome, capitalism and modernity, and for regional societies to revitalize themselves as independent, self-sustaining, and sustainable post-modern communities. Currently, either scenario is still possible for Sado Island's society, since opportunities for the deployment of organic cultural markers and for generating sustainable socio-economic structures with independence from the urban centre abound. We can hope that the latter outcome will eventually transpire and, in so doing, Sado's experience may make a small contribution towards both the stabilization of Japanese society and the emergence of sustainable ways of life worldwide.

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