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Regional Japan: The Price of Prosperity and the Benefits of Dependency

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No longer does Japan have agrarian communities where full-time farmers labor in pastoral tranquillity. There are only regions, the necessary reserves of metropolitan Japan. A look at one rural Japanese family reveals the vast changes that took place in these regions during the Showa period, as urban middle-class values and agricultural subsidies influenced farming areas.

The corrugated landscape of the Japanese archipelago has given a distinct imprint to patterns of habitation and conceptions of regions. Mountainous topography has divided the islands into about a hundred small plains, either intermontane basins or coastal flatlands, which have come to frame political units, economic activity, and cultural identity. The settlement form of these small regions is generally a hinterland of hundreds of nucleated villages and a handful of small towns all now within an hour or so drive of the one to three cities at the plain's center.

One such region of course stands above the rest: the densely packed Kanto Plain—Japan's largest, though only 100 kilometers at its widest, across which sprawls the metropolis of Tokyo. Devastated by the Great Earthquake of 1923, Tokyo recovered to become the highly concentrated core of Showa Japan. Within a 50-kilometer radius (3.6 percent of the country's land area) live 30 million people, or 25 percent of the Japanese population. It is the world's most populous metropolitan area, and for half a century, it has been the capital of politics and administration, the headquarters of corporate

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life and financial capital, the center of mass media and cultural institutions, and the pinnacle of the educational hierarchy. It is Japan's core, to which all other regions are peripheral.

Three generations of the Sato family live together in a rambling house in one of these peripheral regions, the northern plain of Shonai. Save for the home-grown rice and a few of the vegetables and fruits, all the foods on their dining table are national-brand supermarket items. The Sony television in the kitchen that broadcasts during most meals is tuned to NHK public television. Their mealtimes must conform to three different timetables: the mother's job as an accountant at the local factory of a Tokyo-based prefab door manufacturer; the father's three-season job as a salesman for a small printing firm in the nearby city; and the busy civic schedule of the grandfather, including his meetings as head of the town education committee. Only the grandmother is (reluctantly) housebound, having quit a part-time factory job to care full-time for her five-year-old granddaughter and three-year-old grandson until they enter the town kindergarten.

The three outside jobs explain the three vehicles in the driveway: a compact Celica, a subcompact Daihatsu, and a Nissan light truck. The truck is a concession to the family "farm"—three hectares of paddy land and 100 persimmon trees, which require the fourth season of the father's labor and occasional assistance from the grandparents. Almost every evening during my several months with the family, the father raced home to exchange his business suit for either a casual sweater or a loose winter kimono. In the former attire, he drove off to sample area restaurants that featured regional Shonai cuisine—research toward a local public relations pamphlet he had been commissioned by a friend to write. Kimonoed, he settled by the stove to practice Noh drama, drumming under his father's stern direction in preparation for the annual, and nationally famous, village festival.

The net return on the farming contributes only about 25 to 30 percent to the Satos' combined household income, and requires even less of their total work life. Nonetheless, by self-description, they are a resolutely proper—if somewhat nervous—*noka*, a "farm family," and the representativeness of their profile is a measure of both the depths of the farm crisis and the basis of the prosperity that now characterizes rural Japan. The son's balancing of his roles as office

worker, farmer, amateur journalist, and Noh drummer suggests the multiple ways in which life in regional Japan has been drawn into and held apart from society's mainstream.

To be sure, declining agriculture, migrations to the cities, and the "modernization" of rural life are staple, if hackneyed, characterizations of the countryside in all industrial societies. Yet in generalizing from Shonai and the Satos to the regional dynamics of Showa Japan, it is better to avoid a framework of lagging development and "catch-up" linear progress, of rural-urban moves and agrarian-industrial sectoralization. Shifting the usual rubric for talking about the Japanese countryside from "agrarian" to "regional" is not only analytically productive but also historically resonant with changes during the Showa period in the public debate about rural Japan.

One may find in this public debate at least four themes that have come to mark rural Japan as more "regional" than "agrarian": the "rice price problems" besetting Japanese agriculture, the consequences of a particular pattern of "local development," the spread of "mainstream consciousness" across the countryside, and the faddish sentimentalism of "rural nostalgia." Neither their selection nor their order is random. The largely unintended farm crisis has contributed substantially to the subsidized nature of rural prosperity, which permitted and promoted the penetration of institutions and ideologies of the metropolitan center, which in turn has contributed to the romantic backlash of nostalgia for a countryside that, to complete the circle, no longer exists. The four themes thus highlight the contradictory pressures that define regional lifeways and the continuing tensions in the position of Japanese regions as peripheries of a national state and metropolitan culture.

CREATING A FARM CRISIS

In little more than a century, Japanese agriculture has undergone a threefold transformation. At midnineteenth century, the countryside was populated with tenants and peasant smallholders, much of whose surplus production was appropriated by the Tokugawa warrior elite and absentee merchants. By the early twentieth century, innovating landlords had seized the initiative in promoting new labor-intensive practices that were profitable to them if onerous to tenant cultivators. Now, in the late twentieth century, further agri-

cultural change has produced a countryside of weekday workers and weekend farmers, whose highly mechanized overproduction of rice is reluctantly subsidized by the state at considerable economic cost for partisan political gain and, perhaps, more general social welfare. At international forums, national policy circles, and local farmer gatherings, "rice price problems" (*beika mondai*) are the focal issues.

Put simply, the farm crisis in rural Japan today is how it has come to pass that Japanese agriculture, which contributed mightily to the country's early industrialization, has become one of the most technologically advanced and economically inefficient farming systems in the world. That is, how have Japanese rice farmers become world leaders in rice crop yields and yet a substantial drag on their national economy? Ironically, the present-day difficulties are in large part a product of past success—unintended, unanticipated, but related nonetheless. Having restored the productivity levels of agriculture in the 1950s, policy planners through the 1960s and 1970s fervently hoped that their programs and subsidies would produce a core of (a) full-time, (b) cooperating, and (c) diversified farmers. They have been frustrated on all counts. What we find instead is a countryside of noncooperating, part-time farmers concentrating on the one crop for which there is an unmarketable surplus, rice.

The prevailing image of this part-time farming is captured in the popular phrase *sanchan nogyo*, or "farming by grandpa, grandma, and mom." In fact, we can parse this stereotype into two actual patterns. The first is what may be called *toshiyori nogyo*, that is to say, "senior citizen farming" by the elderly grandparents of the household, while the commuter adults and the student children spend their days in the workplaces and schools of the town. In contrast, in the real rice bowls like Shonai, young adult males such as Mr. Sato are the sole (though still seasonal) farmer of the household, and the other adults find nonagricultural jobs. The Ministry of Agriculture calls this *kokeisha nogyo*, or "successor agriculture," which the locals render colloquially as *segare nogyo*. Curiously, postwar mechanization has produced both outcomes. In marginal areas and on small holdings, rototillers, chainsaws, portable sprayers, and small trucks enable an elderly couple to handle most of the tasks of vegetable garden, orchard, and woodlot maintenance. In regions like Shonai, tractors, transplanter, combines, and gas dryers allow the young

males to perform most of the rice work as solitary, independent farmers.

This suggests a further point about the current crisis. Most part-time farming is *rice* farming, because of the structure of the subsidies and the direction of postwar technological innovation. Perhaps that is why the government now believes that by reconfiguring the subsidies and redirecting the technology, it can induce the part-timers away from rice to something else, anything else. Thus, for two decades it has pursued a carrot-and-stick program known as "diversification."¹ For all their exhortations to diversify, however, neither the government extension service nor the agricultural cooperative can offer much guidance. People in Shonai were perhaps exaggerating when they complained to me that coop technicians couldn't tell the difference between lettuce and cabbage or between a pea and a soybean, but it certainly is true that their expertise does not extend much beyond rice.

It is worth remembering that while rice has always had a central place in Japanese farming systems, even those on the broad river plains have been "rice plus"—rice in conjunction with other crops. The trend toward rice monoculture, even monovariety cultivation, is quite recent and government-induced. *Purasu arufa* (plus alpha), as the young Shonai farmers say now, or as Ronald Dore put it so felicitously, "the search for the alchemist's secret," is a deeply felt concern among farmers, but it is proving discouragingly elusive.² Young Mr. Sato often pointed wistfully to a small plot in front of his house on which he intended to construct a greenhouse and begin growing herbs to sell in a university classmate's specialty shop in the prefectural capital. However, he was vague about his timetable and ignorant of herb cultivation and retail market conditions. It is not cultural conservatism but economic good sense and political cynicism toward the "latest variety" (*shinhatsumei*) that extension agents are touting that keeps the rice surpluses mounting.

It must be quickly added, however, that there is more than greed and cynicism behind the continuing salience of a *noka* identity for households like the Satos'. One must understand the reluctance to abandon such an identity in cultural and political terms. The resonance of *noka* is rich, suggesting *jikyū jisoku*, *komyunichii*, *inasaku*, *furusato*. That is, "self-support and communal membership, provid-

ing food for the country and folk for the nation." Growing rice makes more sense culturally than it does agriculturally.

Moreover, in the postwar period, most employment has been effectively *depoliticized*; the enticements and idioms of public service and corporate employment are economic growth, job security, and organizational loyalty. Even the Confucian familial metaphor of the workplace has been sanitized of its imperial referents. The farmer stands as a striking exception. Agricultural work, the subject of protracted prewar tenancy disputes, was effectively *repoliticized*: by the Land Reform, which linked it prominently to democratic principles; by the Agricultural Cooperative Law, which emphasized a democratic association of independent proprietors; and by political party reorganization, which linked it to a party machine, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Under such circumstances, one can appreciate the resistance to yielding such an identity.

SUBSIDIZING RURAL PROSPERITY

Nonetheless, however perplexed is agricultural policy and however dire is agricultural practice, one cannot be unrelievedly pessimistic about this farm crisis. Perhaps the political scientist Kato Eiichi exaggerates in contrasting "urban poverty and rural affluence," but the fact of regional prosperity, both as improvement over the postwar decades and in comparison with urban areas, is remarkable and undeniable.³ By a number of indicators—house ownership, car ownership, per capita disposable income, per capita domestic space, air quality, and so on—rural regions offer better living circumstances than major urban centers. In part, this is a function of personal income, which is enhanced by agricultural price supports, multiple-worker households in rural regions, and lower tax payments due to income-reporting practices of many self-employed.

More significantly, it results from a net outflow of state resources from urban to rural regions. In calculating the pattern of revenue sharing and direct project grants by the central government in 1980, for instance, Kato found that the ratio of tax burden to revenue benefit reveals a striking deficit for urban prefectures and a large surplus for predominantly rural prefectures.⁴ What has happened has been that the same government programs that have produced agricultural crisis have also brought enormous infrastructure improve-

ments to rural society; road networks, telephone lines, community centers, and other public service facilities are constructed with subsidies from the basic agricultural assistance programs or from ancillary programs. Like the rice price supports, this more general state subsidization of regional prosperity has broad parallels but important differences with European and North American government policies.⁵ In Japan, this generosity has been stimulated by, and has in turn sustained, a vibrant local politics, national party brokerage by the dominant conservative LDP, and government ministry intentions. To appreciate both the real benefits and the substantial costs of such a pattern of "local development" (*chiiki kaihatsu*), one must consider each of those three elements.

Amalgamating local units of government has been a crucial administrative transformation of the countryside for 100 years. Since the 1880s, the Interior Ministry and its descendant, the present Home Affairs Ministry, have been as intent upon increasing the scale of local governmental bodies as has the Ministry of Agriculture with increasing farm scale. However, as often as not, this ongoing incorporation of villages into towns and towns into cities has energized rather than paralyzed political process at the local level. One cannot overemphasize the political activity it has generated over the last 40 years and the community consciousness and redefinitions of identity it has engendered. This "amalgamation drive" (*gappei*) has presented opportunities not only for effective top-down administration but also for viable local autonomy.

Jackson Bailey, for example, has described the instructive case of the remote Iwate village of Tanohata. Here, after successfully avoiding amalgamation with adjacent villages, an activist mayor mobilized residents to promote international educational cooperation as a slogan for distinctive local identity, as a platform for town initiatives, and as an attractive ploy for national recognition and government assistance. Likewise, another Iwate village, Sawauchi, made itself nationally famous in the 1970s as the "Village of Nature and Health" because of a program of pensions, comprehensive health care, and preventive health examinations, which had been initiated by a dynamic, energetic mayor in the late 1950s and early 1960s and expanded by later local leaders.⁶

Revitalized local administration has both contributed to the current farm crisis and helped to deflect its worst effects. That is,

together with the land-improvement district and the agricultural cooperative, the town office has been one of the key units through which many of the postwar agricultural programs have been channeled. At the same time, though, these local governments have lobbied effectively for an extensive restructuring of regional infrastructure concomitant with agricultural projects—roads and communications improvements; school, clinic, and other public facility construction; and so on. In this way, local government efforts have exacerbated the contradictions of farming even as they have greatly enhanced the material conditions of life in the countryside.

Yet, one must be careful not to exaggerate the scope of local initiative or the extent to which material prosperity has politically empowered the regions. Perhaps the most repeated stereotype of the postwar Japanese political system has been the mutually beneficial linkage of the LDP and the rural farmers that keeps the former in power and the latter overrepresented—to the disadvantage of the urban voter and the urban consumer. It does not require apologetics to see that it is doubly glib to speak of an alliance of LDP and farmers.

First, rather than an “alliance” of LDP and farmers, it is more accurate to talk about the critical intermediary role that the LDP has played between the national bureaucracy and the regional populace. On the one hand, major LDP factions are beholden to rural regions for electoral support, but they also share with the state bureaucrats a commitment to what one might call a managerial pattern of state governance. The plan rationality that for Chalmers Johnson characterizes economic policy may be taken to be even more broadly descriptive of the logic of the postwar Japanese state.⁷ Both ministry bureaucrats and LDP politicians share an ideological commitment to the centralization of policy planning, program design, and resource allocation and to the delegation of policy execution and program accountability.

Second, since at least the late 1960s, rural support for the LDP has come not from the increasingly endangered species of full-time farmers, but from the far more numerous part-timers, whose interests in employment, consumption, and local services are quite different. If anything, full-time farmers have done rather poorly by LDP agricultural policies. It is the support for price subsidies to part-time rice

farmers and for services and public works for the regions that better explains LDP electoral success and political action.⁸

Thus, both ideological disposition and electoral interests reinforce a pattern of regional development through extensive subsidies. There are real benefits—the transfer of wealth and expertise and the stimulus to local politics—but there is also an ultimate price, and that is a multidimensional subordination. The dispersion of state resources has, if anything, doubly reinforced the hierarchies of education and of private and public employment. That is, it has secured both ideological compliance and institutional efficiency. The Satos are resentful but sanguine about the slim chances that a local graduate could gain entrance to a leading national university, and yet the grandparents had fretted and calculated to insure that their children passed into the best possible local high school. A frequent slogan of recent local conferences and workshops in Shonai has been *jinzai-zukuri*: “how to foster and retain people of talent in the region?” Its popularity speaks more to crisis than opportunity, to the ever more extensive and efficient culling of the best regional talent for the national center.

Employment works as education does to draw the rural population more tightly into the national economy. A symbiosis of farm and factory is not surprising; family farming frequently serves as a reserve labor pool for manufacturing, and present-day Japan is no exception. As a number of scholars have argued⁹ and as the Satos know from their own work careers, there is a vital connection between part-time farming and the subcontracting sector of Japanese industry, which itself is a required cushion around the corporate core. It is a necessary mutualism that is not without benefit to rural households, but which is constructed largely on industry's terms.

Finally, the enormous government investment in infrastructure has enhanced significantly the state's ability to *force* certain changes, when it deems necessary. In Shonai as elsewhere, for example, the extensive irrigation-drainage projects for rice growing have been predicated on redefining agricultural water rights. Longstanding, vaguely defined, but legally guaranteed water use practices have been converted to fixed-term, fixed-quantity permits, issued and renewed through the Ministry of Construction. This ministry, which has long lobbied for greater municipal and industrial access to agricultural water quantities, now has direct authority for regional water resource

allocation. Another example of the loss of control entailed by subsidy dependency has been the success of the Home Affairs Ministry in imposing a retrenchment of local government employees through legislative mandate and budgetary squeezes during the 1980s. These are precisely the jobs most desired by many of the younger locals for their security and status.

METROPOLITANIZING REGIONAL LIFEWAYS

If farming occupies little of the daily lives of the Sato "farm family," what does? Many of their concerns and routines of work, schooling, and family are indistinguishable from those of their many relatives and acquaintances who have moved to metropolitan Tokyo. Life chances in contemporary Japan are not equal, nor have lifeways become homogenized, but they have become more standardized. Regional Japan has become more closely synchronized with the metropolitan center, and "mainstream consciousness" (*churyu ishiki*) is a term frequently used to characterize the consequences of the institutional and ideological articulations I suggested in the previous section.

Mention of mainstream consciousness immediately calls to mind what is perhaps the most notorious public opinion survey in postwar Japan. This is the Survey on the People's Life-style (*Kokumin seikatsu chosa*), which the Prime Minister's Office has conducted annually since the late 1960s.¹⁰ It asks a large sample of respondents to rank their present circumstances as well above, just above, right about, just below, or well below some felt average life situation. For over 20 years, about 90 percent of the respondents have avoided the two extremes and placed themselves at, just above, or just below average, and it is this which commentators have seized upon as evidence for a 90-percent middle-class society.

Critics of this interpretation rightly point to objective dimensions of continuing stratification,¹¹ but I think it would miss the significance of the self-assessments to dismiss the survey as fanciful interpretation or false consciousness. The link between the "New Middle Class" professions of the survey and the private lives of ordinary Japanese is neither direct nor transparent. It lies in the emergence, since the 1950s, of powerful typifications of the ideal organization of family, school, and work. It is only when accosted by opinion

polltakers (and perhaps inquiring anthropologists) that most people lapse into general talk about "middle-class consciousness." The dilemmas and decisions of everyday life are framed in more concrete language, but my point is that this language, which organizes much of daily experience, owes a great deal to the institutional interests that shape that public discourse.

In the last four decades, both official policy and public opinion have idealized career employment in large organizations, meritocratic educational credentialing, and a nuclear household division of labor between the outside "working" husband and the inside domestic wife. This configuration may fly in the face of the realities of life for many Japanese. Nonetheless, by the 1970s and early 1980s, this New Middle Class ideology had come to effectively define standards of achievement, images of the desirable, and limits of the feasible.¹²

Three of the most prescient studies of Showa Japan have been ethnographies of everyday life that reveal this process. In her journal of life in the mid-1930s in the Kyushu village of Suye-mura, Ella Wiswell noted the first intrusions of state promotion of a female ideal of "good wife and wise mother," a growing sense of "propriety" that she felt even more strongly in the decorum of her brief return visit in 1950. Settling into the town of Mamachi on the outskirts of Tokyo in the late 1950s, Ezra Vogel witnessed both population displacement and life-style displacement. A "new middle class" of white-collar employees was emerging amidst the shopkeepers, small business-people, and professionals of the old middle class, and this was changing the character of Mamachi from urban fringe town to metropolitan bedburb. At the same time, David Plath was out in the countryside around Nagano Prefecture's Matsumoto City, where he documented the prevailing regional lifeways of the farmer, the shopkeeper, and the white-collar "salaryman" but also demonstrated the growing attractiveness, across the region, of the life and leisure of the salaryman.¹³

There is as much danger in misreading these observations as in misinterpreting the Prime Minister's Office survey. It was not so much the reality of the white-collar salaryman that they saw or predicted. Ninety percent of the residents of Suye-mura, Mamachi, Matsumoto—and Shonai—have not become salarymen. Rather, the residents have come to widely accept certain cultural constructs as the terms which give meaning and value to their actions. Visions of the

nuclear family, meritocratic schooling, and large organization workplaces have narrowed the preferred meanings of support in family, success in school, and security in work.

The process continues throughout regional Japan. In few ways do such New Middle Class idealizations accurately describe the realities of family, school, and work for the Satos or most other residents of Shonai Plain. Like many married women, the young Mrs. Sato continues her full-time accounting job and must accommodate that to her domestic ambitions as wife and mother. Yet she does have such ambitions, which differ from those held by her mother and mother-in-law. Her husband is one of the very few of his generation in Kurokawa who have gone on to university and returned; almost all of his neighbor peers found work after graduating from one of the area's less competitive high schools. He has recently bought a used portable computer from his print-shop boss to bring home for his children's use with (he hopes) educational software. And while no one in the Sato family enjoys the full security of white-collar employment, it is precisely this security that is a central concern in their assessments of alternative work opportunities.

Certain New Middle Class routines as well as standards have come to characterize their lives. The individuation of their factory work and even their farm work, and its displacement from the home, has redrawn the boundaries between family and society as sharply for this part-time farm family as for more stereotypically white-collar families. The Satos remain a "three-generation family" (*san sedai kazoku*), seemingly at odds with the nuclear norm, and yet new spatial layouts, chore assignments, and leisure patterns reflect a middle-class sensitivity to privacy *within* the family as well as between family and society. The young couple, for example, in physical space (in their own cars and their own areas of the house) and in social time (after the evening bath and on "family" trips), has carved out a nuclear unit within the multigenerational residence group.

At the same time as new lines are drawn between home and society, institutions of that larger society—schools, public agencies, mass media—intrude upon family life with a force that regularizes the life-cycle experience across occupations and family forms. The young Mr. Sato's brother is a research professional for a prefectural forestry station; Mrs. Sato's siblings include a high school teacher

and a nonworking housewife-mother. In their particulars, these life courses have diverged. But this generational set has been tightly synchronized in their timing of school leaving, work entrance, marriage, and childbearing. They illustrate how life-cycle transitions have become increasingly orderly and uniform, and how metropolitan rather than distinctly urban and rural standards often prevail.

CELEBRATING THE IMAGINARY COUNTRYSIDE

There is at least one element of my profile of young Mr. Sato, however, that may have struck the reader as hardly "metropolitan," and that is his diligent evening practice of Noh drumming. Every February 1 and 2, hundreds of people gather at the main shrine of the Satos' village for an annual festivity that includes Shinto ritual, youthful competitions, copious drinking, and all-night presentations of stately Noh drama. Like their ancestors, the Sato father and grandfather are both musicians, and they alternate in playing the small shoulder drum during the long Noh programs.

In 1989, the assembled included local parishioners of the shrine, friends and relatives, tourists and Noh scholars from Tokyo, Europe, and North America, and camera crews from NHK TV and the BBC. Indeed, this Kurokawa festival and its Noh drama have become one of rural Japan's most well-known "folk art performances"—the subject of television documentaries, scholarly dissertations, and tourist guidebooks.

While unusual in its notoriety, it is but one of hundreds of vibrant regional festivities that continue to draw throngs of locals and metropolitans alike. They are riding the crest of a "rural nostalgia" (*furusato bumu*) sentimentalism that has engaged the nation for almost 20 years.¹⁴

Several weeks after the festival, on a frigid February morning, I accompanied the grandfather to the opening ceremony for the new local elementary school. It is an imposing edifice of futuristic architectural lines, an art deco pastel exterior, modular classrooms, and well-appointed science labs. Following the predictable speeches, the ceremony closed with each grade presenting a special activity—tumbling and floor exercises, a recorder-percussion band, and so on. The fifth graders were led by one of the chief Kurokawa actors in

chanting sections from several Noh plays, which he practices with them each Friday afternoon.

I seemed to be the only one in the audience disoriented by this juxtaposition of education for a high-tech future and heritage of a preindustrial past, but other discordancies are more keenly felt. These include especially the shifting regard for rural life by the metropolitan center. That urban imaginations of the countryside oscillate between snobbish condescension and rhapsodizing sentimentality is of course a recurring theme of all nation-states.¹⁵ Showa Japan has certainly been no exception. In the interwar decades of the 1920s and 1930s, the countryside figured prominently in a "national folklore," which gained academic and popular recognition around three overlapping fields of research: the collection and classification of folk customs of the agrarian countryside by Yanagita and Origuchi; the discovery and promotion of folk arts of pottery, weaving, and handicrafts by Yanagi Muneyoshi; and Honda Yasuji's exhaustive recordings of and writings about folk performances of ritual festival dances. It was in fact Honda's visits to Kurokawa Noh in the 1930s that first brought it national attention.

In the decade following defeat in World War II, metropolitan views of the countryside turned to denigration. It was now suspect, the bastion of residual "semifeudal" elements and superstitious customs that were antithetical to that which was "modern" and "democratic" and desirable. An enthusiasm for "rationalization" swept the rural regions as fervently as it reshaped society's center.¹⁶ Yet even as society's center aimed to transform Shonai life through its programs of rationalization, it began again to appropriate Shonai's past as a nostalgic reassurance of its own idealized past. By the late 1960s, the chains of blind custom became the roots of authentic tradition, and the countryside was again upheld as a last preserve of noble virtues. In a flush of rural nostalgia, the cultural institutions and authorities at the society's center have come to fetishize countrysides like Shonai in travel posters, tourist itineraries, and television specials. Now it is the quaintness of farmhouses, the integrity of farm work, and the bonds of the village community that are celebrated and valorized as a moral counterweight to the industrial core of bureaucracy and corporation.

People in regions like Shonai are sensitive and even savvy about these shifting nuances, especially in their use of *noson*, "farming

village," as both *furusato*, "the old homeplace," and *inaka*, "the hick boonies." Few of the hundreds of Shonai settlements have even a significant minority of full-time farmers, but *noson* (like *noka*) remains a common self-description. At least in part, this plays on the term's ambivalent connotations. As the backward *inaka*, the *noson* seems a most eligible and appropriate target for the state's generously subsidized rural development programs, including the block grant from the Ministry of Education to construct the Satos' new elementary school.

In other contexts—as the traditional *furusato*—*noson* life offers a rhetorical defense against the felt excesses of the national society its residents otherwise eagerly embrace. The same Ministry of Education has also designated Kurokawa Noh as a "national intangible living folk treasure," and has funded a new hall beside the village shrine, with a practice stage, exhibit space, and lecture rooms. This official designation is an important example of agrarian cultural heritage, although like the Satos, there isn't a full-time farmer among any of the core participants.

Thus, in Showa Japan there was no simple contest between an incorporating center and regions struggling to preserve autonomy. Prevailing typifications of life and structures of state power have had a directive force in regional lifeways, even as mass culture draws contradictory images of such regions and their residents. Japan's countrysides are now both its *inaka* and its *furusato*. As the backward "boonies," they must be assimilated into a modern society, but as the nation's "folk," they must be preserved as testimony to a moral society.

And yet we now know that these contradictory impulses mark transformations of private and civic life in the cities as much as in the regions.¹⁷ One now finds modern kitchens and "traditional" festivals in the center and at the periphery. When the world's largest advertising agency, Dentsu, establishes a Regional Culture Development Division and engineers a festival campaign called "Shitamachi Live '85" for one of Tokyo's central wards, one can talk not only about the commercialization of culture (an overused notion anyway) but also about the "urbanization of nostalgia."¹⁸ Perhaps even more appropriately, it marks the metropolitanization of nostalgia. As the drive to rationalize has moved from the state center outward to its

regions, the urge to sentimentalize has insinuated itself from the peripheral countryside into the urban core.

DEVELOPING SHONAI FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

We have seen that beginning an analysis of contemporary rural Japan with rice and the rice crisis is at once necessary and misleading. It was the notably successful democratization and mechanization of rice farming in the first three postwar decades that radically transformed rural life and provided the basis of the fragile but real material prosperity of regions like Shonai. Yet the growing contradictions within agricultural policy and practice and the standardizing intrusions of state institutions into rural life have precipitated a reconfiguration of employment patterns, social relationships, cultural identity, and political allegiance. There are no agrarian countrysides in contemporary Japan, except in the (senti)mental imagery of *furusato* motifs. There *are* regions—the necessary, dependent reserves of metropolitan Japan, both favored and disadvantaged, valorized and stigmatized.

At community meetings and other gatherings in Shonai, there is usually little abstract policy debate about the “rice crisis” and about “dependent prosperity.” Rather, people’s concerns focus, naturally enough, on concrete issues of direct impact. Prominent in the late 1980s have been the following four proposals that both supporters and critics have claimed as representing the wave of the region’s future:

1. Disposition of a new Epson/Seiko integrated-circuit manufacturing plant. In the mid-1980s, after controversial negotiations to acquire paddy land in the middle of Shonai Plain, the Epson/Seiko Corporation began construction of a new microelectronics assembly plant that was to provide several hundred factory jobs. Its opening was soon suspended, as the company increasingly shifted such manufacturing operations to its overseas plants. It became a local casualty of what is frequently and ominously labeled in the national press as the “hollowing” of industrial Japan.

2. Prospects for the new Shonai Regional Airport. Plans for the Seiko plant were an important element in the successful campaign, against some local opposition, to construct a regional airport, also in

the central plain. This is a local manifestation of a larger national debate about the desirable and feasible shape of a futuristic transportation network for northeastern Japan involving air links, high-speed rail lines, and superhighways. Airport supporters argue that it is a valuable first step, essential to attracting corporate investment and offering a new route for hydroponic flowers and fresh vegetables to the Tokyo markets. Critics fear it is an extravagant and frivolous alternative to much-needed but (given land acquisition costs) more expensive rail and road improvements.

3. Plans for metropolitan play and local work. Several national ministries and agencies are now actively promoting leisure resort industry for regions like Shonai. The Seibu Group has recently purchased a large tract on the slopes of Mt. Chokai, the local "Mt. Fuji," with plans for an "all-season" leisure resort. In addition to skiing, swimming, tennis, and other predictable offerings, it has plans for what it calls "tourist agriculture" and "cultural tourism." The employment of locals as cleaning women and groundskeepers by day and traditional carvers and authentic folk dancers by evening is a paradox not lost on Shonai residents, but willing to be overlooked by many of them.

4. The "rationalization" of the Faculty of Agriculture at the prefecture's national university. Among the Ministry of Education's worries about the nation's universities is the precipitous decline in applicants for faculties of agriculture. Each of the six national universities in northeastern Japan has such a faculty; Yamagata University's is located away from the main campus, in the Shonai city of Tsuruoka, where it sits proudly as the region's pinnacle of higher education. The ministry is hoping to eliminate the majority of these agriculture faculties and to repackage their departments as biotechnology, robotics engineering, leisure sociology, regional economics, and so on. Some would like to coordinate this with the regional "technopolis" proposals in the 1986 Fourth National Development Plan (*Yonzenso*). In Yamagata, this would spell the closing of the Tsuruoka campus in favor of a consolidated campus at the interior prefectural capital. Shonai residents bitterly oppose this as a fatal blow to whatever educational prestige the region can presently lay claim to.

No region is alike in the particulars of its present concerns, but taken together, these four issues illustrate the more general paradoxes

of regional Japan, which have been outlined here and which Shonai households like the Satos' enact in their everyday lives. *Prosperity* is not a word the Satos use to describe their nonetheless modestly comfortable lives, nor is a mood of impending crisis at all reflected in the guardedly optimistic manner in which they greet most days. And yet throughout the Showa decades, both conditions, in equal measure and in mutual determination, have characterized the shape of their lifeways and that of their region.

ENDNOTES

- ¹Richard Moore, *Japanese Agriculture: Patterns of Rural Development* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989).
- ²Ronald Dore, *Shimohata: A Portrait of a Japanese Village* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- ³Kato Eiichi, "Toshi no fukushu: Echigo daimyo Mejiro-dono no kozai," *Chuo koron* (June 1983): 72-89. A partial translation of this article appeared as "Urban Discontent Under Tanaka's Political Machine," *Japan Echo* 10 (4) (1983): 15-25. On postwar improvement, see Robert J. Smith, Jr., *Kurusu: The Price of Progress in a Japanese Village, 1951-1975* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), and Dore.
- ⁴See Kato, 78.
- ⁵See the discussion in Kent E. Calder, *Crisis and Compensation: Public Policy and Political Stability in Japan, 1949-1986* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 234-44 and 277-85.
- ⁶Jackson Bailey, "Local Politics and Political Leadership in Rural Japan: Tanohatamura, 1955-1980," unpublished paper presented at Association for Asian Studies Annual Meetings (Philadelphia, March 1985); on Sawauchi: Christie W. Kiefer, "Care of the Aged in Japan," in Edward Norbeck and Margaret Lock, eds., *Health, Illness, and Medical Care in Japan: Cultural and Social Dimensions* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 95-97.
- ⁷Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982). Kent Calder (op. cit.) has recently proposed a provocative "crisis and compensation" dynamic to explain the political policies that have subsidized a wide range of domestic sectors and interest groups in postwar Japan.
- ⁸See, for example, Gerald L. Curtis, *The Japanese Way of Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 49-61.
- ⁹For example, Calder; Moore; and David Friedman, *The Misunderstood Miracle: Industrial Development and Political Change in Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
- ¹⁰For English-language debate on this poll and its interpretations, see Aoki Shigeru, "Debunking the 90%-Middle-Class Myth," *Japan Echo* 6 (2) (1979): 29-33;

Taira Koji, "The Middle Class in Japan and the United States," *Japan Echo* 6 (2) (1979): 18–28; and Murakami Yasusuke, "The Age of New Middle Mass Politics: The Case of Japan," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 8 (1) (1982): 29–72.

- ¹¹For example, Tominaga Kenichi, ed., *Nihon no kaiso kozo* (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1979).
- ¹²Although I talk here rather generally about a "New Middle Class" ideology, in fact public commentary on class and mass has shifted much in the course of the Showa period. In just the postwar period, it has moved through at least three broad stages. In the two decades of recovery and catch-up, 1945–1965, much of the debate focused on the significance and character of an emerging "mass society" (*taishu shakai*) and "mass culture" (*taishu bunka*), borrowing from American and European controversies of the time. The mid-1960s introduced a new rubric for public commentary—"mainstream consciousness" (*churyu ishiki*) or "the mass mainstream of 100 million people" (*ichiokunin sochuryu*). It was this which prompted the boasts of a "90 percent middle class" society. By the end of Showa, in the 1980s, this class-mass discourse had taken another turn, toward what some have called a "consumer culture" debate. A uniform middle class with standard needs, many claim, has given way to a "diversified middle class" with multiple preferences. The advertising executive Fujioka Wakao, for example, uses the term *micromasses* in his *Sayonara taishu* (Tokyo: PHP Institute, 1984). The Hakuodo Institute of Life and Living, prefers "fragmented groups" or *bunshu* in its "*Bunshu*" *no tanjo* (Tokyo: Nihon keizai shimbun, 1985). Thus, from *taishu* to *bunshu*, debate about a "New Middle Class" has been a shifting rather than a fixed ideological field during the postwar decades.
- ¹³Robert J. Smith, Jr., and Ella Lury Wiswell, *The Women of Suye Mura* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Ezra Vogel, *Japan's New Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and David Plath *The After Hours: Modern Japan and the Search for Enjoyment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).
- ¹⁴William W. Kelly, "Rethinking Rural Festivals in Contemporary Japan," *Japan Foundation Newsletter* 15 (2) (1987): 12–15, and "Japanese No-Noh: The Crosstalk of Public Culture in a Rural Festivity," *Public Culture* 2 (2) (Spring 1990): 65–81.
- ¹⁵For an instructive example, see Susan Carol Rogers, "Good to Think: The 'Peasant' in Contemporary France," *Anthropological Quarterly* 60 (2) (1987): 56–63.
- ¹⁶William W. Kelly, "Rationalization and Nostalgia: Cultural Dynamics of New Middle Class Japan," *American Ethnologist* 13 (4) (1986): 603–18.
- ¹⁷For example, Theodore C. Bestor, "Tradition and Japanese Social Organization: Institutional Development in a Tokyo Neighborhood," *Ethnology* 24 (1985): 121–35; Jennifer Ellen Robertson, "The Making of Kodaira; Being an Ethnography of a Japanese City's Progress," Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, Cornell University, 1985; and Sugiura Noriyuki, "The Urbanization of Nostalgia: The Changing Nature of Nostalgic Landscape in Postwar Japan," unpublished paper presented at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meetings (Portland, Oreg., 1987).

¹⁸Sugiura.