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Abstract: This paper overviews the progress in the social and cultural geography of Japanese rural areas from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s by considering four topics: political and economic restructuring, sustainable systems of social integration and subsistence, self-governance of natural environments, and the history of the social construction of rural images. Today, Japanese rural geographers encounter two kinds of globalization: economic globalization, which directly or partially influences the four phenomena above, and the globalization of research activities by geographers who must internationally develop their own theoretical frameworks on these topics.

Key words: Japanese rural geography, economic globalization, community sustainability, subsistence system, environmental governance, rurality

Introduction

In the field of Japanese geography, rural geography has traditionally been a major sub-discipline. However, it has failed to adequately develop new frameworks and perspectives to explain the drastic socio-spatial changes in rural areas and villages during Japan’s high economic growth period from 1955 to 1973 (Takahashi 1997a: 88). As a result, since the 1960s the quantity of studies in Japanese rural geography has sharply declined (Aoki 1989: 12–16). Ishihara (2003: 7) showed that the share of papers and books on rural geography among publications in the entire discipline of geography remained steady at 36.1% in the early 1950s but decreased to 11.9% by the early 1990s.

Ishihara (2003: 8–13), however, pointed out that the study of Japanese rural geography has been revitalized since the 1980s due to the following points of rebirth: the establishment of theories of urbanized rural areas and depopulated mountain villages, international concerns over the sustainability of rural societies and natural environments, the introduction of behavioral approaches and quantitative methods, the interdisciplinary development of symbolism in studying village spaces, and the expansion of field-works in overseas rural areas.

Regarding the progress in Japanese human geography before the early 1990s, some scholars have already reviewed publications in the following sub-disciplines: cultural geography (Hisatake 1996), historical geography (Mizoguchi 1996), mountain village studies (Okahashi 1996), and behavioral approaches (Wakabayashi 1996). To some extent, they also cited studies on social and cultural geographical topics of Japanese villages. However, from the end of the last century, Japanese villages have experienced new social-cultural changes under economic globalization, which is the first globalization focused on in this paper, and political-economic restructuring: worldwide free agro-trade competition, the retiring of aged farmers and the severe shortage of successors, the large-scale mergers of local municipalities, the continued weakening of the social integration of communities, and the increasing interest in natural environments and traditional landscape conservation (Tabayashi and Kikuchi 2000: 7–16; Okahashi 2004: 236, 2007: 29–30; Sakuno 2006: 264–272).

This paper, therefore, grasps the current problems by reviewing the vicissitudes in the social and cultural geography of Japanese rural areas from the mid 1990s. Concentrating on studies that focus on a village or villages as the local-
scale lifeworld of rural residents, this paper examines the following four topics: the macro-scale restructuring of policy and economy under economic globalization; the sustainability of social integration and subsistence within village communities; the self-governance of natural environments as a community resource; and the history of the social construction of rural images or ‘rurality’ by both village outsiders and insiders. In conclusion, the author also refers to the problem of the globalization of research activities, which is the second globalization focused on in this paper.

**Political-Economic Restructuring under Globalization**

Based on the distance from a city and the socio-spatial changes after the high economic growth period within the whole nation, Japanese rural areas can generally be classified into the following three types: rural-urban fringe, countryside plains within commuting distance of metropolises or local cities, and remote hilly-mountainous areas (Hamatani 1985: 210–218).

First, as the urbanization of rural areas spread, a new type of village was witnessed: it was composed of both local farmers and non-farm newcomers coexisting within the same community in rural-urban fringes (Takahashi 1993: 105–107). Kawase (1999), who explored the commuting activity of married couples in a residential district and a rural settlement within a rural-urban fringe of the Tokyo metropolitan area, showed that most men in the residential district worked in the central areas of Tokyo as full-time white-collar workers. In contrast, the workplaces of rural villagers, especially rural women employed as part-time blue-collar workers, were still narrowly restricted to areas near their homes.

Second, in countryside plains within commuting distances to cities, the rural landscape and village social systems have been relatively sustained, despite the increase in part-time farmers (Hamatani 1985: 213; Takahashi 1997a: 94). Kinda and Fujii (2004) comprehensively researched the regional structure of dispersed villages and the hinterlands of small local cities. They pointed out that these areas have retained their sustainability because they are blessed with improvements in agricultural infrastructure and farmlands, motorization, relocation of factories from cities, and tourism. However, in such sustainable villages after the 1990s, most part-time farmers have reached retirement age and their sons or daughters have chosen other career options than farming. In those villages, farming support companies have been established that are subsidized by national and prefectural governments (Tabayashi 2003: 240–243).

Third, remote hilly-mountainous areas have continuously declined due to long-term depopulation after the high economic growth period (Hamatani 1985: 215; Sekido 2000: 288–318). In these areas, employment opportunities are generally restricted to the public and construction sectors as well as small factories (Kajita 1998: 574–576). Nishino (1998: 247) argued that these areas demonstrated the loss of local self-sustainability because their economies are being subsumed by powerful global and national economies. This problem was also shown in coal mining regions experiencing closures in places which had supplied the bulk of the country’s energy before the 1950s (Nishihara 1998).

Many Japanese geographers have tackled these serious problems in the remote mountainous areas, which they described as the ‘less favored areas’ (Ishihara 1997: 297) following the high economic growth period. Okahashi (1996: 63–64, 1997: 65–96), inspired by the ‘core-periphery’ concept of dependency theories, suggested a new framework of ‘peripheralization’ to grasp the situation faced by Japanese mountain villages. He pointed out that such peripheralized villages have experienced the decline of agriculture and forestry, the opening of new factories, the expansion of public investment in construction projects (see also Tsutsui 2005: 53–64), and growing tourism. These phenomena, according to him, show an economic integration process both into market economies and the regional division of labor within the country.

Sakuno (1996) pointed out that these villages as ‘periphery’ strengthened economic dependency on cities as the ‘core,’ which is located near villages and in distant metropolitan areas. Due to the sparse population and low economic demand, facilities for supplying goods and services could not be located within or near these villages. He
showed that since the 1970s small central towns in mountainous areas have had their own economic functions and independence from higher-level cities diminished within a regional central place system.

Small remote islands are another type of peripheral region. Yamauchi (2004: 354–355) pointed out that after World War II, fisheries became a depressed sector like agriculture. But due to the lack of opportunity for suitable subsidiary businesses, Japanese fishing households who often live on remote islands had to choose either continuing full-time fishing or shutting down their fishing operations. He reported the changes from a combination of fishing and farming to fishing alone on the Iki Islands during the high economic growth period (Yamauchi 2002) and clarified two conditions for household survival on Oro Island in Kyushu: social customs promoting each household’s succession as well as sharing fishing innovations and information among households (Yamauchi 2000).

Furthermore, Okahashi (2004: 236–248) insisted that, after peripheralization, Japanese mountain villages entered a new stage of reorganization at the beginning of the 21st century. As political factors of such reorganization, he exemplified nationwide fiscal reform (see also Tsutsui 2005: 65–66) and the ‘Great Merger’ of the Heisei era, which led to a decline of the public services for mountain villages. As economic factors, he cited the following four points: the relocation of factories abroad especially in China, shrinking public investments in the construction sector (also see Kajita 2001), the growth of welfare services and green tourism, and the partial liberalization of rice and vegetable imports under the WTO regime.

Motoki (2006: 95–147) traced the decrease in paddy fields after the high economic growth period and illustrated that the national structure of Japanese agriculture drastically changed from a northeast-southwest divisional pattern into a core-periphery pattern under global agro-food systems dominated by the USA. Analyzing industrialized and internationalized contemporary Japanese agriculture, geographers adapted a ‘food system approach’ that comprehensively grasped the global process of production, distribution, and consumption (Araki 2002; Takayanagi 2006). Araki (2002: 249–259) indicated that the reorganized Japanese food systems are now composed of only a few product centers that successfully survived such as Kyushu; some producing centers adapted strategically high-valued brand products such as pickled plums and melons (see Takayanagi 2006: 190–211), while a few big markets such as Tokyo and Osaka predominantly consume such high-quality products. In global and nationwide competition of agro-commodity production, such branding strategies have become important for the economic survival of Japanese rural areas and villages (Takayanagi 2006: 190–211).

Sustainable Social Integration and Subsistence within Villages

Under such nationwide political-economic restructuring, the sustainability of social integration and the self-government of village communities became important. Tabayashi and Kikuchi (2000: 491–505) clarified the sustainability of rural communities by comparing ‘rurbanized’ areas, countryside plains within commuting distance of cities, and remote mountainous areas. They confirmed three foundations of rural sustainability: shorter distance from a city, larger paddy fields per farming household, and stronger social network solidarity within a community.

First, Takahashi (1997b) constructed a macro-theoretical framework to grasp the ‘rurbanized’ areas unique to Japan and to overcome the limitations of traditional rural geography that treated individual villages and often ignored the relationships between villages and cities. He classified the patterns of reorganization and functional change in self-government and agricultural associations in all rural settlements within the cities of Hamamatsu and Niigata. He also clarified the micro-interactions and the social cleavages between local farmers and non-farming newcomers.

Second, concerning countryside plains within commuting distance of cities, Tabayashi et al. (2000) showed the high degree of agricultural and community sustainability in fruit-growing villages near a local city about 100 kilometers from Tokyo. Matsui (1999) clarified that the traditional religious networks of Shinto shrines sus-
tained the social integration of the elderly in such rural areas.

Third, in depopulated mountainous areas, due to insufficient population to maintain neighborhood communities, each self-government association of villages has often been integrated within a primary school district or a public center area (Takahashi 1997a: 96; Nakajo 2006: 10–12; Sakuno 2006: 273). These depopulated areas are also the most disadvantaged in the global-scale survival of agro-food production (Takayanagi 2006: 31) as well as in the public provision of home helper services for the elderly (Nakagawa 2002: 163). Since the residents remaining in such villages are aging and dying, deprived ‘social blank areas’ (Fujita 1998a: 178) or uninhabited ‘residential blank areas’ (Sakuno 2006: 265) are expanding throughout the country. To prevent such severe depopulation, some local governments of mountainous areas and remote islands have promoted inflows of urban residents born outside the areas and supported them to permanently settle in local villages; Sakuno (2006: 274–277) and Tanigawa (2004) overviewed such ‘I-turn’ migrations.

Kim (1999: 107–109, 2003: 9–23) proposed a theoretical framework of an ‘endogenous self-organization,’ where such networks as self-government associations and recreation clubs function as powerful actors of ‘village renaissances’ in depopulated mountainous areas. His framework explained the vitality in endogenous self-organizations based on each household’s costs: negotiation cost with the local government, bargaining cost in the market, and organizing cost within its community. Compared with Korean villages, Kim criticized, Japanese community organizations in mountainous areas have deepened their subordination to local and central governments, which often subsidize such endeavors and manage the development of tourism. Okahashi (2000: 131–133, 2004: 248–249) exemplified another problem faced by present mountain villages: being too far from the ‘core’ regions of cities. Although this problem has been mitigated by nationwide road construction, as Mitani (1997) reported on depopulated villages, a new problem is now appearing. Aged residents without cars or who cannot drive must depend on public bus services that have been reduced due to shrinking profits. Nakajo (2003) clarified the social networks of such retired aged persons, which include local government helpers, their neighbors, and their families now living in cities. As Fujita (1998a: 194) pointed out, these depopulated mountain villages are, ironically, ‘the most advanced areas’ in the aging within Japan’s highly aging society. Many elderly men and women, however, still actively work in agriculture and local small factories within such villages (Nakajo 2005).

Under these peripheralization situations, the village renaissance of peripheralized areas has been a major topic in Japanese geography (Sekido 2000: 353–384). Yagi (1998a: 142–144) showed that in contemporary Japan, renewed and sometimes invented ‘traditional’ folk rituals and cultures in villages have been exploited as commodities for tourism and resources for village renaissances, many of which are financially supported and managed by local governments. From a public finance viewpoint of ‘endogenous development,’ many geographers have insisted that such village renaissance activities as the development of tourism and local specialties for sale should be conducted with local capital and public funds as well as by local residents themselves (Tsutsui 1999: 100–102; Shinohara 2000: 211; Miyaguchi 2007: 172–180). Interchange projects between rural farmers and urban residents, such as rental ownership of paddy terraces, trial farming experiences, and the home delivery of farm products (Nakashima 1999: 178–232; Sekido 2000: 353–384) have contributed to such village renaissances under the current post-productivism in ‘mature’ Japanese society that has come to depend not only on economic rationalism.

To fully understand the present situation of Japanese villages and villagers, we also need to clarify the exact historical backgrounds including their subsistence as local systems. Such a discussion should also offer valuable suggestions about contemporary environmental issues. Fujita (1998b) elaborately traced the rise and fall of the Yoshino forestry region, which used to be a remote hinterland of Osaka since the early 18th century. His work is an excellent model of historical regional geography: it encompasses the social structure and forest ownership within set-
tlements, inter-village networks and central place systems within the region, changes of distribution routes for timber to Osaka, and drastic depopulation with hydroelectric dam construction of the post-World War II period.

Concerning early-modern subsistence, Iwasaki (1999), who researched cotton cultivation in central Japan, cited the extensive use in rural villages of seasonal side jobs such as fishing, sake brewing, and carpentry. Mizoguchi (2002) historically traced the subsistence of dry farming villages and slash-and-burn field villages in the 400 years since the early-modern times, emphasizing the importance of farming wheat, millet, buckwheat, and beans in Japanese villages. He also abstracted the central place system of the early-modern Nagoya region, based on the 'core-periphery' concept and detailed local gazetteers from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries (Mizoguchi 2005). Local agricultural techniques in central Japan from the late 18th century were investigated by Arizono (1997, 2005), who proposed sustainable environmental utilization using traditional techniques. The multiple management of farming with forestry based on traditional organic methods called 'environmentally friendly agriculture' also survived in the mountain villages of Kyushu until the 1990s, but it has begun to collapse under internationalized agro-production competition (Suzuki 1997: 289).

Focusing on some remote islands, Kobayashi (2003) established an environmental history of the Ryukyu (Okinawa) Islands in the southern end of Japan from the 15th to the 19th centuries, examining the cultivation and natural conditions of rice as well as agricultural land-use and crops. After demonstrating the agricultural fissure between the Ryukyu Islands and mainland Japan, he questioned the common view of cultural diffusion, proposed originally by folklorist Yanagita, as the 'path on the ocean' from Ryukyu to mainland Japan.

For the modern era, Nakanishi (2003) clarified subsistence management and the strategy of sericulturist farmers in the early 19th century by concentrating on their agricultural diaries. He pointed out that the period from World War I to the Great Depression was an important epoch in the development of modern Japanese villages during which many drastic changes occurred: diversification of farming management, increase of side jobs, introduction of wages to farm laborers, and changes in the daily rhythms of life on the farm. Imazato (2004) quantitatively traced the historical changes in the mixture pattern of livelihoods in a fishing village during the 20th century and classified each household's subsistence strategies after the Great Depression.

The development process of reclamation in modern Japan from the late 19th century has been addressed by many scholars. Tsubaki (1996a) reviewed past geographical and sociological studies on modern reclamation settlements, including Hokkaido, which was originally the land of the native Ainu people. Pioneer settlements in Hokkaido were regarded as socially and culturally different from traditional Japanese villages. Ike (2002), however, criticized existing studies for over emphasizing the break between Hokkaido's pioneer villages and traditional Japanese villages. He examined the social characteristics of a common forest in a Hokkaido village not only to show the differences but also the similarities with the traditional villages of mainland Japan.

For modern reclamation settlements outside Hokkaido, Tsubaki (1996b) extensively reviewed the profiles of regional distribution, original groups of settlers, and agricultural crops. Village reclamation as part of the post-World War II rehabilitation effort was also an important national policy of Japan. Yamano (2006) traced the detailed development of land-use and farming under national policies in five reclamation projects on lakes and coasts since the 1960s. By introducing the actor network theory (ANT), Kitasaki (2002) elucidated the role of reclamation actors on national, regional, and local scales in a case study of Ibaraki Prefecture.

Motoki (1997) traced the countrywide development process of paddy fields during modern times and clarified that such development conducted by national policies was most advanced in the Tohoku district of northeastern Japan, especially during the high economic growth period. This development, which mainly spread in cold regions and on arid uplands generally unfit for rice cultivation, can be seen as one climax of Japanese agricultural technology. Some scholars emphasized that such extraordinary efforts to
Self-Governance of Natural Environments as Community Resources

Such traditional sustainable utilization and the self-governance of natural environments as ecosystems, which have supported local subsistence, are still important issues for today's Japanese villages (Takahashi 1997b: 36-38). Before being reclaimed, shoreline areas were a traditional common resource. From an historical geographical approach, Sano (2005) clarified that almost all fauna and flora in an ecotone lagoon of Hachiro-gata were common resources for the surrounding villages until the 1920s and that the sustainability of these natural resources was realized under the control and management of village communities. She also traced the historical changes in an ecosystem and its subsistence use in a lagoon of Lake Biwa from the 17th century to the wartime era of the 1940s (Sano 2003).

The most well-known ecosystems in Japan today are paddy terraces (Nakashima 1999) and common hilly woodlands near settlements (Sugitani 2000), some of which recently became legally protected. In particular, such 'multi-functions' of paddy terraces as a precious cultural heritage, which include a maintenance resource of the ecosystem and a prevention measure of flood disasters, are now well recognized by urban residents (Haruyama 2004: 15–19); some have joined to preserve and engage in part-time rice farming (Nakashima 1999: 146–232). Muranaka (2002) introduced a contingent valuation method (CVM), which is a cost-benefit analysis, to estimate the cultural-social value of paddy terraces in a mountain village of Kochi Prefecture. Muranaka and Terawaki (2005) also evaluated a village forest in Hyogo Prefecture using CVM to discuss environmental management. In Japan, it is becoming difficult for agricultural lands to survive without being labeled 'public goods' that must be conserved (Ishihara 1997: 301–302).

While serving as the chairman of a national advisory council, Miyaguchi (2007: 109–111) proposed a new idea for future successful villages by creating the concept of 'living style with abundant natural environments.' However, Okahashi (2004: 249) showed the instability and devastation of ecosystems in depopulated mountainous areas due to the decline of agriculture and forestry. Yokoyama (2001) revealed that the recovery of typhoon-damaged forests in a mountain village of Kyushu was often incomplete, especially at sites held by absentee landowners living in such distant metropolitan areas as Tokyo and Osaka.

Ike (2006) reported cases of the successful conversion of such traditional Japanese 'commons' as village forests and coastal fishing grounds into tourism sites: skating rinks, hot-spring resorts, and cottage lots since the 1960s as well as scuba diving spots since the 1980s. He pointed out that village communities independently promoted tourism and earned enough money for social and ecological sustainability. He observed that the tourism developments of such common spaces do not always lead to rural destruction; however, he showed the failure of a common forest area owned by a larger self-management association organized by many villages without communal regulation power over the land within each village.

As a successful case of sustainable environmental utilization on remote islands, Oro (2000) investigated the subsistence strategy and production system of beef cattle breeding on the Oki Islands to show its superior production costs over the mainland's system. Ishikawa (2005) also examined the Oki cattle economy and pointed out that since the 1970s, the traditional recreation of bullfighting has become a tourist attraction, so a social network of bullfighters is now expanding throughout and beyond the islands. These studies indicate that strategic and practical use of traditional resources can lead to effective sustainability of peripheral regions.

Ishikawa (2005: 375) pointed out that Japanese geographers have returned their attention to animals to reflect the growth of environmental ethics in the 1990s. Takahashi, S. (2001) discussed both the harm and benefits of wild boars, which damage farmland and are hunted by man
as well as yet play indirect roles in village renaissances. To prevent damage to farmlands, he observed their behavior around agricultural forests near rural settlements and suburbs using GPS (Takahashi 2006: 87-114).

Nonaka (2005: 121-176) reported the traditional folk culture of wasp hunting. Larvae cooking contests and nest growing competitions have promoted village renaissances in the highland villages of central Japan (Park and Nonaka 2003: 171-197). He pointed out that plants, animals, and insects are natural resources for subsistence, which are inseparable from users' value and knowledge, and so the same natural environment is perceived and utilized differently among people both inside and outside a village (Park and Nonaka 2003: 100-105, 216-236; Nonaka 2005: 184-186).

Water resources, which have also been critical natural resources for rural subsistence, are often linked with serious contemporary issues. Uchida (2003) overviewed irrigation ponds from the viewpoints of nationwide distribution, flood damage, water shortages, and the renaissance in urbanized areas. Moritaki (2003) insisted that the rushed construction of hydroelectric dams throughout Japan during the high economic growth period damaged local traditional irrigation systems and mountain village communities. Nishino (1998: 241-242) also criticized such construction for inflicting heavy sacrifices on the relocated villagers and accelerating the decline of mountainous areas.

Until now, few Japanese geographers have linked their research activities with social movements. Recently, however, some scholars have begun to view rural water resources from a social movement perspective (Kagawa 2004: 36-37). Ito and Asano (2003), strongly aware of the social relevance of geographical research, reported such Japanese environmental issues as lake reclamation, water pollution, and the illegal disposal of junk cars. Based on his research of regional irrigation systems, Ito (2006) joined the campaigns of local residents opposing the construction of the Nagara River weir and Tokuyama hydroelectric dam in central Japan.

Okahashi (2004: 250) pointed out the increasing role of urban residents in mountain village renaissances and in environmental conservation movements. However, as Takahashi (2003: 63) suggested, there is often a separation in the concept of 'nature' between rural farmers utilizing the land for agriculture and urban residents visiting it for relaxation, even in rural-urban fringes. For example, although golf course developments are sometimes opposed by both urban residents and rural farmers, who are concerned over the environmental harm caused by chemicals (Sugitani 1998), such facilities are often warmly welcomed by depopulated mountain villagers as the last hope for economic survival (Nishino 1998: 164-173).

Within the powerful structure of contemporary industrialized society, Nishino (1998: 195-196) urged urban people to understand the present serious situation and the historical backgrounds of peripheral mountain villages. These villages have already experienced the long-term recessions of the forestry and agricultural sectors as well as the submergence of settlements by dam construction, while still sustaining the potential value of forests and rivers as public goods.

To attain such mutual understanding between urban residents and rural farmers, we need to understand in detail the lives of village people (Takahashi 2003: 63-64): sacred places (Yagi 1998b: 49-229), historical diffusions of folk religions and rituals (Yoshinari 2003), the daily rhythms of farming (Arai 2001), the patterns of seasonal labor migration (Nakamura 2000), the subsistence activities and such techniques as fishing (Tawa 1997; Nakamura 2002) and gathering wild plants (Ikeya 2003) and the cognition of minor place names both in agricultural-forestry zones (Fujinaga 2000; Sekido 2000: 9-173) and in fishing grounds (Yazaki 2003).

'Rural Village' Gazed by Outsiders and Insiders

When researchers, urban residents, and politicians recognize and understand rural villages, the previous perspectives of general rural areas and villages strongly influence their perspectives and images. The problem is self-reflection on our 'gaze' and 'positionality' to rural areas (Takahashi
From a historical approach to geographical thought, Sekido (2000: 175–218) investigated how researchers and politicians have conceptually recognized ‘mountain village’ since the mid 19th century. Komeie (2002: 215–353) historically traced how mountain villagers represented their social self-image through their indigenous histories as well as why the Tokugawa government and its local officers politically classified Japanese villages as ‘agricultural,’ ‘mountain,’ or ‘fishing’ from the 18th century. Akitsu (2000: 168–172), a rural sociologist, assumed that the concept of ‘mountain village’ was established in Japan by governmental policies in the early 20th century, while Komeie (2002: 345–347) insisted that it originated from the tax policies of the Tokugawa government in the 17th century.

Another new approach to the social construction of rural images is clearly influenced by postmodern geographers in Britain. From this perspective, Fukuda (1996) reported that a red-roofed landscape as an ‘invented tradition’ on a remote Okinawa island has contributed to tourism by forming the basis of the islanders’ self identity. As this case shows, how rural residents themselves recognize their own living place is vital to the question of the social construction of rurality. Takagi (2002) analyzed an autobiographical novel written by a man who grew up in a mountain village in Shikoku and migrated to a large city after high school. According to Takagi, this novel vividly describes the local people’s cognition of rapid changes in village life and the process of subordination to the nationwide market economy during the 40 years since the high economic growth period.

Research frontiers in British rural geography after the ‘cultural turn’ were eagerly introduced by Takahashi (1997a: 97–99, 1998), who regards the contemporary Japanese rural landscape as a commercialized space of contradictory interests (Takahashi 1999: 93–94). Accordingly, he stressed the importance of understanding who produced such rural images as ‘countryside idyll’ and how they are circulated. He empirically examined the policy discourse of the central government (Takahashi, M. 2001) and the ‘lay discourses’ of university students (Takahashi and Nakagawa 2002) about Japanese rural areas.

In this situation, perceptual approaches such as questionnaire-based research on resident consciousnesses have also flourished: living environment perceptions, hometown images, and attitudes toward environmental conservation (Waldichuk and Whitney 1997; Takahashi 2000, 2004; Sekido 2004). It seems that Japanese rural geography also overlaps sociological approaches that extensively exploit the questionnaire method. However, although it is indeed important to expand our perspectives into other disciplines or outside the country, we must also retain and explore how our own methods and theories impact such disciplines and countries.

**Conclusion**

The areal differentiation of socio-spatial changes in Japanese villages can be classified into three zones: the rural-urban fringe, the countryside plains, and the remote hilly-mountainous areas, each of which has faced its own social issues. By surveying these issues, we showed that Japanese rural geographers have taken some common perspectives and positions: the encouragement of endogenous development by villagers themselves, the reevaluation of traditional subsistence systems as a part of nationwide sustainable ecology, the attention on folk cultures as tourist attractions for urban residents, interchanges between villagers and urban residents, and reflections on outsiders’ views of rural areas. These points show that the issues of rural areas are also ‘rural-urban relationship problems’ in situations where Japanese geographers, most of whom are urban residents, are increasing their participation in national policy on rural areas (Yada 1996: 259; Miyaguchi 2007; Kinda 2007: 95) or in social opposition movements (Moritaki 2003: 323; Ito 2006: 371).

To develop both the academic and policy-making aspects of Japanese rural geography, we first must refine our own theoretical frameworks. In social geography, the few examples of original thought include theories on ‘rurban’ communities, the peripheralization of mountain villages, and endogenous self-organization in village communities. In cultural geography, for example, theoretical frameworks have been successfully established on subsistence activities in fishing...
village areas. However, concerning the geography of fishing villages, as Tawa (2005: 250–251) reviewed, scholars are very scarce. From the other viewpoint that regards culture as a ‘symbolic system of meaning’ (Nakamata 2003: 434), there is much room for theoretical development beyond existing studies on the folk classifications of rural spaces.

Another methodological development is the advancement of analytical techniques. Multi-variate analysis (Takahashi 1997b: 69–243) and GIS (Sakuno et al. 2000; Yokoyama 2001; Mizoguchi 2002: 353–381, 2005) are now commonly used, especially in macro-scale studies exploiting highly detailed statistical censuses on agriculture, forestry, fishery, and village communities by the Japanese government. An original demographic database system based on the investigation of religious registrations in the 17th and 18th century Japan has been constructed and posted on a Japanese website (Kawaguchi 1996: 153). GPS is also utilized to track the behavior of wild animals appearing around human living spaces (Takahashi 2006). Renewed interest in the natural environment including wild animals (Takahashi, S. 2001) and insects (Nonaka 2005) should lead to a reassessment of physical geography and natural sciences in Japanese human geography.

Japanese rural geographers now face two kinds of globalization. One is economic globalization within rural areas. Under worldwide competition, unique local characteristics of each rural area or village, such as local agro-commodity brands (Takayanagi 2006: 44) and renewed folk rituals (Yagi 1998a), are now emphasized as survival resources for disadvantaged areas. We researchers need to understand more profoundly the subjective worlds and local values of rural residents, including both subsistence and religious aspects (Haruyama 2004: 3–6; Imazato 2006: 3–11). As Tsutsumi (1995: 242) hypothesized, during regional changes a village’s cultural element is generally better sustained than the social, political, and economic elements. Okahashi (2000: 121–122) proposed three themes for future studies in Japanese rural geography: understanding villages in relation to outside factors such as cities and the world market, pursuing a comprehensive understanding of rural areas and villages, and establishing common theoretical frameworks among advanced countries.

It is, therefore, crucial that we recognize the second type of globalization: the globalization of research activities. Japanese rural geographers, similar to Japanese cultural anthropologists (Kuwayama 2004: 48–61), are living in a ‘periphery’ region within the worldwide academia and have researched Japanese native societies and cultures, which have particular historical backgrounds. They have developed their research activities relatively independently from the research frontiers of English-speaking countries, which have taken the initiative as the ‘core’ regions in the worldwide geography academic circles. Thus, compared with urban and economic geographers, it is more difficult for rural geographers in Japan to find common ground with geographers in English-speaking countries.

To overcome this difficulty, Japanese rural geographers must make greater efforts to refine their own theoretical frameworks on such topics as sustainable rural societies, environmental governance, and folk cultures at a level that is internationally comparable with key perspectives and concepts established outside Japan, based on the numerous and detailed empirical studies that have been carried out over many years.

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Notes

1. In this paper, ‘rural area’ or ‘village’ refers to sparsely populated and extensive land-use (such as paddy fields and woodlands) dominated areas (Takahashi 1997b: 9); in contrast, ‘urban area’ or ‘city’ refers to densely populated and intensive land-use (such as business and residential districts) dominated areas.

2. Because most research books in Japanese human geography by a single author are compiled and revised from previously published papers in journals from the past 10 or 20 years, this review paper contains some research achievements from
the 1980s.

3. It indicates discourses not by professionals of rural studies and policies but by ordinary people.

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