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ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE CHOICES:

JAPANESE SNOWBOARDERS IN NEW ZEALAND

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Foreword

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have helped me over the course of this thesis project. At Lunds Universitet, my supervisor Dr Anne Jerneck has been a wonderful and considerate support and I am truly grateful for her assistance. In addition, I would like to thank all staff at Lunds Universitet and Waseda University in Tokyo who offered me advice and assistance. Also, a warm thanks to my classmates at Lund, especially those who have offered me friendship, encouragement and advice. This also goes for my friends in the UK and Japan who read my thesis and gave me some great ideas to work with.

In New Zealand, I must give thanks to Nathan Thompson who first introduced me to snowboarding, Akakura and Methven. He's probably responsible for my interest in this field and he has been an informative outlet when I have sought help, although I don't thank him for the expenses I have incurred in pursuit of this interest. A mention must go to Snow Denn Lodge in Methven where I stayed throughout my fieldwork and for the previous two years. It is certainly a home from home for me.

To all those who allowed me to interview, live with and observe them in New Zealand, I am extremely grateful, especially for their thoughtful consideration about my project and the help and assistance they offered. It was hard to remain objective as a researcher with people who invariably I sought to become friends with.

Finally, to my family, who have put up with my mood swings and frustrations as I have striven to get this thesis done, in particular my mum and dad, without whom I would have had no chance to experience the wonderful opportunities I have been lucky enough to have had and for their support, financial and otherwise throughout the whole process.

Prologue

Several months after arriving in Japan as a participant on the JET Programme¹, I travelled to the ski-resort of Akakura-onsen in the prefecture of Niigata for a weekend of snowboarding. Immediately I was hooked, and over the course of the next three years, I returned to Akakura and other mountains in Japan on a regular basis. Whilst here, I got to know several of the local snowboarders, and over time I began to develop an interest in not only what they were doing, but why they were doing it. Up till that point, my experience of Japan was that if you are clever, you go to University then go on to work as a salaryman within a corporation, it was pretty much the done thing.

I made the assumption that those who had chosen to spend several months of the year snowboarding in Japan and worked out of season to afford trips to ski resorts in the southern hemisphere in Japan's summer months, had not been to University and made this choice because it offered perhaps the best option of economic success for them. This judgement was largely based on observations of sports stars in the UK, where an intelligent footballer is a rarity, and even modest achievements in school mark them out as intellectuals.

Returning from Akakura to my home in Mie-ken, I raised this issue with a friend from New Zealand, a dedicated snowboarder who had been travelling backwards and forwards to Japan for several years. Remarking that I would love to live a life where I could wake up every morning with a smile on my face and a mountain to ride, my friend asked 'why not?', to which my reply was that I thought it would be a waste of the education I'd received up to that point. To make such a decision to satisfy my quest for happiness seemed a bit selfish at the time, and I'm not sure my parents would have approved. I assumed that the Japanese snowboarders I knew at Akakura had not been to University and thus did not have to wrestle with expectations in their conscience. Here I was corrected. My friend pointed out that most had in fact been to University, and one or two had been to the best Universities in Japan. They had wrestled with their conscience and decided that rather than enter Japan's career-track into the corporate lifestyle, they were going to do something different.

Over the next couple of years I got to know these guys and the Japanese social situation a little better. I spent a lot of time watching and learning about baseball and how proud Japanese are at the successes of their players in America. This led me to wonder if attitudes towards success and identity had changed. In the schools I taught, students were more interested in Major League Baseball² and Premiership football stars than traditional sports. My interest in why young, educated Japanese are making alternative lifestyle choices and travelling to different countries was stimulated.

¹ The JET Programme is a teaching and cultural exchange programme for non-Japanese English speaking graduates.

² Major League Baseball is the American Baseball league and traditionally, few Japanese have played in it.

Abstract

There is a debate in Japan which focuses on the lifestyle choices of young Japanese. The elder generation think youth are being selfish and not making a sufficient contribution to society in that they are not conforming to traditional societal expectations.

However, it is not so easy to contribute to society when youth have been hit particularly hard by unemployment, changing recruitment practices and an increasing number of lifestyle choices being made available to them. Are Japanese youth being selfish or they being blamed unfairly?

This thesis considers those young Japanese who choose to spend several months of the year snowboarding in New Zealand, looking into why they make this particular choice. I examine those Japanese who defer entry to the career track in order to pursue their interests, considering how this may be changing Japanese society, with particular reference to changing employment opportunities and gendered differences.

Snowboarding has led to a form of individualism, but this may not necessarily be a dangerous thing for Japanese society. I propose that Japanese snowboarders can be a real source of hope for 21st Century Japanese Society.

Keywords

Snowboarding, Identity, Youth, Employment, Globalisation

1. Introduction

My aim is to examine the relationship between youth and society in Japan, specifically the proposition that some young Japanese appear to be rejecting traditional societal expectations. The focus of my study is those youth who choose to spend time snowboarding abroad, considering reasons why they make this choice, how they have rejected these expectations through their decision making process, and how this is challenging the social order. Finally I will consider if these decisions might actually be beneficial for society.

Japanese youth are clearly not conforming to societal expectations. This is impacting on demography and the economy, in essence the very being of the Japanese nation itself. Two key problems facing Japan after the 'Heisei' recession³ are ensuring the continuity of economic recovery and catering for an ageing population, whilst retaining a sense of Japanese identity. The belief amongst the elder generation is that a rise in *kojinshugi* (individualism) (Herbig & Borstoff 1995: 51, Reischauer & Jansen 2005: 160) or *wagamama* (selfishness) is threatening the very fabric of Japanese society (Yamada 1999: 52).

They (youth) have been blamed for everything from the slump in the birth-rate to the rise in crime. (Lloyd Parry 2006⁴)

This threat to society is being taken seriously, as it has implications for the social order and identity.

The survival of that social order depends on young people being willing to enter and re-create the world of their elders (Mathews & White 2004: 1)

My empirical observations suggest that this 'willingness' is coming under pressure from forces internal and external to Japan in the era of Globalisation, leading to youth exploring alternative lifestyle options open to them today.

³ Heisei Recession – Also known as 'The Lost Decade'. These terms are used to refer to the period in the 1990's following the burst of Japan's economic bubble, marking the end of the rapid growth era.

⁴ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,32129-2432829,00.html>

2. Youth in Japan

There is a cultural dichotomy existing in Japan between the traditional expectations set out by the elder generation and the lifestyles of some of the younger generation. This has resulted today in something Mathews & White (2004: 2) call 'Generational Conflict'. There is a socially prescribed path which is not being followed by some. Sociologist Robert K. Merton refers to an individual's relationship with society as being part of a 'value consensus' (Haralambos 1995: 390), where all members of society share the same values. Due to different positions in the social structure, some in society do not have the same opportunity to realise these values. Merton's work looks at the cultural goals in 1930's America, but they can be compared to what Mathews & White call the 'Japanese Cultural Ideal' (2004: 4). I have defined the stereotypical cultural ideal in the footnotes⁵ based on my experience living in Japan. Merton's functionalist approach outlines five ways in which members of society respond to success goals; they can conform by following the prescribed institutional means or they can innovate (e.g. turn to crime), ritualise (reject goals), retreat altogether from society or rebel. My study examines those who appear to reject the 'standard path'; institutionally prescribed means of achieving success, outside of Japan in what appears at face-value to be an act of rebellion. How are youth not following the path? Ono (2005) suggests that there is an increasing tendency for youth to make 'alternative lifestyle choices'. Her study focuses on Japanese temporal migrants in Thailand who opt out of Japanese society. There are many

⁵ Traditional Expectations

Go to school; work hard in class, at *juku* (cram school) and captain the baseball team. Study hard through examination hell and ensure a place at a good University. Spend 3 or 4 years at University learning how to live and networking, developing contacts that might be useful in a future career. Graduate then go to work as a salaryman for a big corporation. Start at the bottom of the ladder within the corporation and steadily work your way up, remembering that you must only go home once the boss has. Drink and play golf with your colleagues, excessively, even if you have a wife and family at home. Take 3 days holiday a year, and use them to visit family or Shrines. Repeat annually until you retire / die, hopefully in a senior management position. In short, you are expected to give your all to the company to ensure continued economic growth and success.

Female Differences

Females follow a similar pattern to males, except they play softball as opposed to baseball and they go to work with the aim of finding a husband before setting up home and looking after the children.

examples of these groups in Japan today ranging from Harajuku Girls⁶ to Snowboarders and Surfers, all of whom are in the public consciousness.

The challenge posed by the 'youth problem' to society is spelt out in a Government report entitled "Youth Independence and Challenge Plan" (2005), suggesting that high levels of unemployment among the young and a growth in numbers of youth choosing not to go to work could pose grave social problems, including a 'weakening of the economic base and social insurance system' (ibid). This has been picked up on by commentators on Japanese society;

A growing number of young people are insisting on leading their lives as they please and are refusing to conform to (in their opinion) outdated and previously unquestioned norms. This perception threatens their elders... (Herbig & Borstoff 1995: 55)

There is clearly something wrong in a society in which young adults lead extravagant lives free of responsibility while the middle age suffer the most hardship. This surge in breed of singles is beginning to wreak havoc on Japanese society. It may also be undermining the economy. (Yamada 2000: 50)

There is a generational divide where adults claim not to understand youths, and the young say that the elder generation are 'out of touch'. A series of neologisms have been coined to highlight the various ways in which youth are failing to live up to social expectations, including *furiitaa*⁷, *hikikomori* / *sotokomori*⁸, *NEETS*⁹, *parasaito shingeru*¹⁰ and *Shinjinrui*¹¹. With the exception of *furiitaa* and *NEET*'s, all are Japanese inventions devised by social commentators and the media. Yamada (1999) and Kotani (in Mathews & White 2004: pp31 - 47) both point to a general 'passivity' of youth and lack of motivation. Senior figures in the Japanese Government have cited the dangers that such groups and attitudes pose to the continued well-being of society. Former Prime Minister

⁶ Named after the subway station where they congregate, Harajuku Girls dress in several distinct styles of clothing. They have been popularised by the American singer Gwen Stefani.

⁷ ***Furiitaa (Freeters)*** are Japanese aged 18-30 who work in part-time jobs to pay for activities in their spare time. Typical employment might be in a convenience store or a factory. The word *furiitaa* is derived from 'free-time' and the German 'Arbeiter' meaning to work.

⁸ ***Hikikomori*** are young Japanese who live in their rooms. They retreat completely from society. 'Soto', meaning 'outside' in Japanese has been applied to the concept of *Hikikomori* by Yuji Shimokawa to describe those who withdraw from society to a different country, such as Thailand.

⁹ ***NEETS*** is a British term invented in 1997 referring to those who are not in education, employment or training. It has gained popularity in Japan.

¹⁰ Sociologist Masahiro Yamada coined the phrase ***Parasite Singles*** to describe those Japanese in employment who live at home with their parents, and have high disposable incomes. They are parasites in that they live off their parents, and Yamada sees them to be damaging in that they are not contributing to society in terms of marriage and fertility.

¹¹ ***Shinjinrui*** literally means 'new breed' and the term became popular amongst Japanese media in the 1980's to describe those who were more concerned with individual pursuits than their work.

Junichiro Koizumi has complained that youth simply don't want to work and the current leader, Shinzo Abe, recognises 'the major challenge' of invigorating youth and their approach to employment in his book, 'Towards a Beautiful Country'. Government White Papers have been conducted with a series of prescriptions to alleviate the problem of getting young Japanese to become good, contributing members of society (National Lifestyle White Paper 2005) including proposals in 2000 by the National Conference on Education Reform's to make volunteer activities compulsory for all 18 year olds over the period of one year (Kotani in Mathews & White 2004: 44). In one case, Tsutomu Takebe, the former secretary-general of the ruling LDP¹² proposed a radical solution to the 'youth problem'.

Why don't they all join the self-defences forces and go to Iraq? (Lloyd Parry 2006¹³)

Takebe's pronunciation is indicative of the generational gap that seems to exist in Japan. Has this always existed or have we reached a stage where the choices of the younger generation are bringing about a radical change in society? Mathews & White (2004: 3) pose this question, asking whether youth will eventually end up like their parents, as happened with students who revolted in the 1960's. Today's Japan is very different to the one their parents grew up in. It is marked by stability, economic dynamism, technological change and choice. There is no comparison to the nation that emerged defeated at the end of the 2nd World War. The core values of harmony, consensus and dedication to the company that saw Japan recover in the post-war period have been enshrined by the elder generations and held-up as an example of how to contribute effectively to society.

So, why are some young Japanese not conforming to these core values? Internal (Naiatsu) and external (Gaiatsu) factors shaped by Globalisation have been a driver for change. Internal factors are those that push people away from Japan, for example, changing business and employment practices, affecting employment opportunities and the structure of the family, especially after the economic stagnation of the 1990's and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997. External factors are those that pull individuals from Japan towards different identities available today. Globalisation has facilitated increased choices. Here I refer to media communications and travel which make people

¹² LDP – Liberal Democratic Party

¹³ <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,32129-2432829,00.html>

aware of the world outside. When the external and internal factors are combined, it is possible to learn why people are making 'alternative lifestyle choices';

This greater freedom of choice for young people than in generations past is due not simply to the fading legitimacy of the adult Japanese social order, but also to a globalization of consumption and information. (Mathews & White 2004: 193)

2.1. Push Factors – Why leave Japan?

Globalisation has changed employment opportunities and practices. WebJapan¹⁴ suggests that Japanese businesses are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in the global economy, partly because of the weakness of domestic demand¹⁵. Traditionally there has existed something called 'lifetime employment', where an individual has been guaranteed a job for life. Reischauer & Jansen describe this expectation;

Employment for both management and labour is likely to last until the normal age of retirement. For both, this brings a sense of security and also pride in and loyalty to the firm. (2005: 133)

Genda & Rebick (2000) and Ono (2006) question the extent to which this system existed, but it seems real in the Japanese conscience. The main structural problem has been the relative lack of employment opportunities first encountered in the chu-hyogaki (employment ice-age) (Chivacci 2005, Ono 2005), culminating in a graduate employment rate of 59.7% in March 2005 from a peak of over 80% at the beginning of the 1990's as seen in the chart below.

¹⁴ <http://web-japan.org/> Web Japan is sponsored by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and is designed to give information about Japan and Japanese Affairs

¹⁵ <http://web-jpn.org/factsheet/economy/index.html>

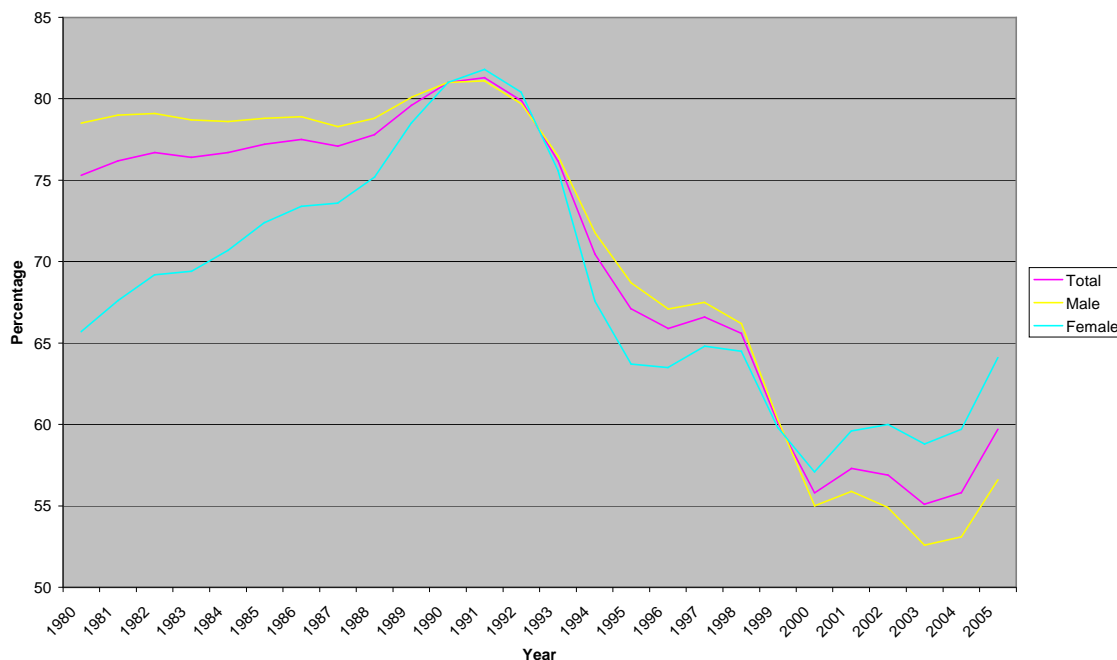


Figure 1 - University Graduates going directly into employment.

Source: Japan Statistics Bureau¹⁶

We can see from this chart there has been a marked decline for males and females going straight from University into employment. This has only recently started to pick up again.

Youth have been hit particularly hard by economic stagnation in Japan. It has become more difficult to find a job. Genda & Rebick (2000: 96) suggest youth employment levels are extremely sensitive to the business cycle. The 1990's have been referred to as 'The Lost Decade', highlighting the severity of this period. The media made much of employment difficulties, especially for middle-aged salarymen, but as Mathews & White point out, the unemployment rate was at its lowest amongst those in their forties and fifties, and at its highest among those in their twenties. Genda & Rebick show that the overall unemployment rate rose from 2.1% in 1990 to 4.7% in 1999, compared to a virtual tripling from 1% to 2.7% amongst University Graduates (2000: 86) The imbalance remains today, with Sawaji (Jan 2007: 7) indicating that the overall unemployment rate runs at 4.1% in August 2006, with the 15-24 age group rate being 7.9%. Kosugi (2006: 2) points out that until the 1990's, 'a special labour market existed for fresh graduates' and Chivacci (2005:

¹⁶ <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/index.htm>

19) points to changing recruitment practices dictated by the economic slow-down. Today, more people are being recruited mid-career than through traditional links between University and the company. Rather than recruit graduates who require training and have 'commitment' question marks hanging over their heads. Firms are showing a tendency to keep hold of older workers. There are some examples of a more radical restructuring taking place as Japanese corporations encountered trouble, the most famous being Carlos Ghosn's restructuring of the hierarchical employment structure at the car manufacturer Nissan¹⁷.

Having established that opportunities have diminished, the willingness of graduates to enter the *sogoshoku* (career path) must be considered. Adachi (2006: 28) suggests that 17.8% of graduates had no plans to find employment in 2005, or go into further education. Mathews (2004: 121) looks at this process and identifies three types of student and their approaches to the process. There are those who fully commit to it (Merton's conformists), those who participate reluctantly and those who 'forsook it altogether to follow their own dreams'. Those who do not enter the *shushoku katsudo* (career employment track) become NEETS and *furiitaa* (Mathews 2004, Kosugi 2006) who fail to secure a job through failure to do so or a refusal. Genda (Mathews & White 2004: 122) indicates that the window of opportunity for entering the career track is small, probably only one year, so any graduate choosing not to enter into it is making a decision with big implications.

Employment problems have also affected the family unit. Vlastos (2002: 6) talks of 'institutional reflexivity' when faced with the change and innovation that accompanies globalisation. The Japanese family has had to be flexible as fathers became unemployed and faced up to life in the family house, something they have not traditionally been used to. Bestor & Hardacre (2004) state that there is a 'distinct dynamic' in family life where men are expected to 'devote themselves wholeheartedly to the job...whatever the corporation requires of him' and mothers 'bear full responsibility for raising the children'. Nonoyama (2000) suggests that the father's occupational role is outside the family, whilst the mother's is inside 'in order to adapt successfully to the

¹⁷ Ghosn's success at Nissan has spawned voluminous literature crediting him with changing Japanese working practices and modernising one of the *zaibatsu* – traditional companies. Nissan took a more radical approach than Toyota in bringing a foreigner in to effectively salvage the company, where Toyota relied on a more traditional, Japanese approach. There has been much discussion, usually on the shelves of Japanese bookshops debating which approach has worked better as both companies have emerged spectacularly from the period of stagnation.

increasing industrialization of society'. Sugimoto (2002: 98) considers the corporation to be like a family. It is a socializing device where leaders have used the family metaphor to 'inculcate the norm of total commitment'. If this institution is seen to be failing, then it stands to reason that individuals will question this total commitment. Within the family, the younger generation have seen the commitment made does not always guarantee security or happiness. Herbig & Borstoff (1995: 54) suggest that young do not feel any respect for their parents in contemporary society, perhaps because they have given their lives to the corporation. The fact is they have grown up in a different world to their parents, and the influence of the 'post-war economic boom' and globalisation has been a key driver behind this.

The traditional importance of the family as a socializing institution is highlighted by Giddens (1993: 76), and along with the education system, it plays a fundamental role in shaping future generations to become good Japanese. He makes the point that these traditional institutions are coming under threat from the increasing diversity of agencies of socialization, such as peer groups and the media. This is connected to the increasing availability of choice, or the pull factors that have come about with Globalisation.

2.2. Pull Factors – What lies abroad?

Insomuch as there are reasons for leaving Japan, there has to be a reason to go somewhere else. Media, business and even the Japanese Government have been complicit in making travel and participation in alternative subcultures attractive in the era of globalisation. Ono (2005: 2) states how Thailand offers her subjects an escape from the 'rigidity of Japanese society'. By going abroad, youth can escape the pressurised expectations from family, the media¹⁸ and society. In one sense, they are postponing reality by not facing up to domestic responsibilities conferred by the standard path.

The media, be it magazines, the internet or television have been responsible for encouraging Japanese to go abroad. Travel companies market the beauty of alternative lifestyles in places like

¹⁸ The media play a dual role in that they encourage young Japanese to go abroad in some instances, yet in others, examples of media are critical of the decisions that youth in Japanese society make. Different agents in society use the media for different purposes.

Thailand and New Zealand as something cool and desirable. Lifestyle guides tell you what you should wear and the internet and TV transmit images of cool places to go and things to do¹⁹. The decreasing cost of international air travel and spending time abroad, combined with the increased incomes of Japanese has made international travel well within their reach. In the 1990's, a loss of legitimacy in the social order created a generation who encountered a decreasing supply of graduate employment opportunities at the same time as media and even the state were encouraging them to indulge in choice and live diversity. In 1995, the White Paper on National Lifestyle's urged society to move toward 'diverse lifestyles that allow us to live fully.' (Nakano & Wagatsuma in Mathews & White 2004: 13) With fewer job opportunities and the encouragement of individualism, it is understandable that youth began to make 'alternative lifestyle choices'. The problem here was that at the same time that living diversity was being encouraged, the Japanese economy was beginning to stagnate.

2.3. Snowboarding

Snowboarding is a lifestyle choice which reached a peak in terms of popularity in the late 1990's. At a time when the legitimacy of the social order was being questioned, the popularity of a non-conformist sport developed.

Snowboarding has always been about youth confronting adult society. (Brad Steward, president of Bonfire Snowboarding in Heino 2000: 184)

One of the reasons for choosing to look at snowboarding is because it has developed as a sub-cultural pursuit against the established mainstream choice of skiing. The diagram below shows the symbolism of snowboarding. Here I will look at how the development of snowboarding might be considered a microcosm of what is taking place in Japanese society.

¹⁹ This was confirmed by my experience living in Japan. There are literally hundreds of these magazines catering to youth, one of which can be seen in fig. 3

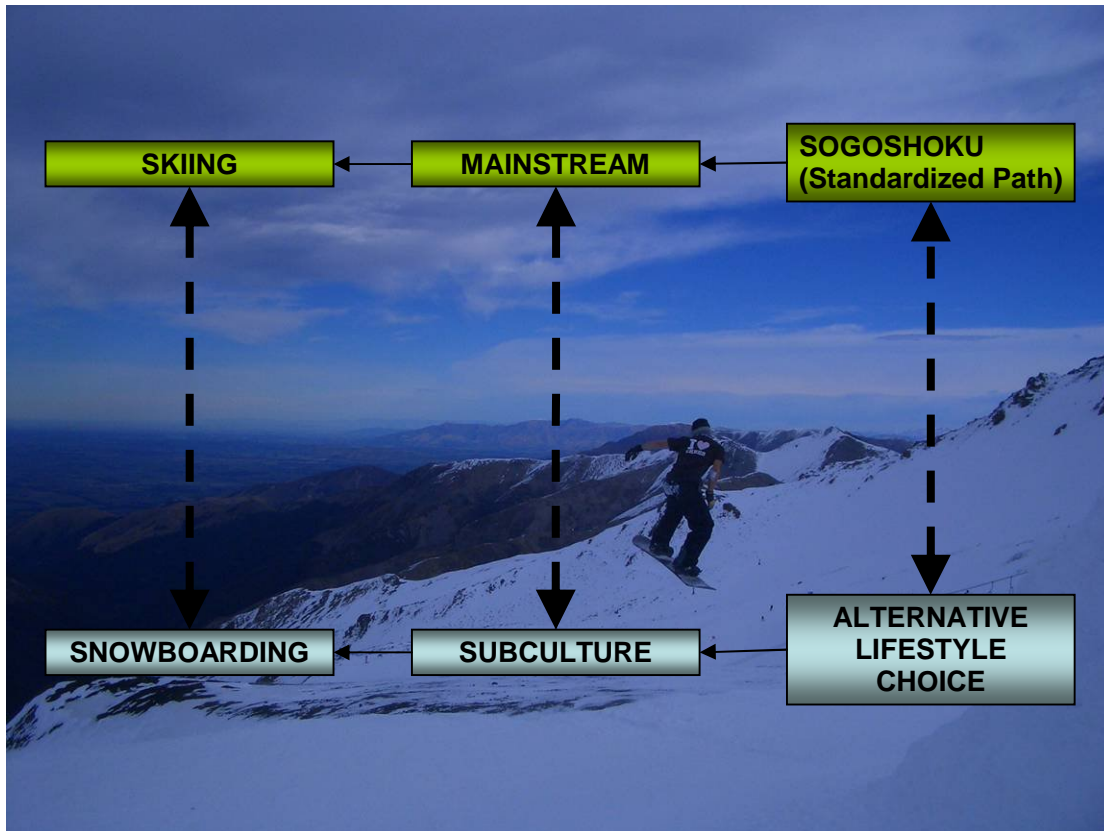


Figure 2 - Snowboarding: Progression or Rebellion?

The sport is a derivative of skiing, surfing and skateboarding. It began in the 1970's and developed before achieving huge popularity by the 1990's, to the point where today, it stands on a near equal footing with skiing in terms of participation²⁰. In New Zealand, snowboarding penetration of the overall market runs at 32% compared to skiing at 52% according to figures from NZski.com²¹. David Owendale, marketing manager for NZski.com goes so far as to credit snowboarding with 'saving our butts' at a time when skiing was in decline. The sport has developed as an alternative to skiing which has been immensely popular amongst youth in particular. As Japanese youth are presenting a challenge to the established hierarchy in society, snowboarding has presented a challenge to the established sport of skiing;

Snowboarding was born in youthful resistance to the popular sport of skiing and the values of sport it represents. (Heino 2000: 178)

²⁰ My observations in Japan would suggest that snowboarding is more popular than skiing amongst youth.

²¹ www.nzski.com – website and information service for three ski resorts in New Zealand.

Since the 1990's, snowboarding has been commercialised as its popularity increased, yet it seeks to retain its image as a rebellious, anti-establishment pursuit. There is much symbolism in snowboarding that marks it out as different to the mainstream. The very act of 'riding' down the mountain, cutting up skiers, jumping queues and riding 'OB'²² exemplifies rebellion. The choice of 'mob-style' clothing, the equipment used and the language that has developed with the sport further mark the 'alternative' brand. Participants are called 'riders' or 'shredders' and words such as 'sick' or 'dope' are used to describe something good. This language smacks of anti-establishment and rebellion. It is an expressive pursuit, where riders cruise down the mountain in a free-spirited way. Snowboarding tends to eschew the competitive instinct that exists in skiing (and a capitalist society like Japan) and revolves more around the notion that it's the taking part that counts. Heino (2000: 182) talks of the non-competitive atmosphere, perhaps best demonstrated by the actions of the world's top snowboarder in 1998, Terje Haakonsen, who refused to participate in the Nagano Winter Olympics;

Snowboarding is about fresh tracks and carving powder and being yourself and not being judged by others. It's not about nationalism and politics and big money. (Heino 2000: 182)

Jake Burton is recognised as a pioneer of snowboarding, and the high priest of the sport. The sole owner of Burton Snowboards, he controls a company which owns 50% of a \$400million global market. Burton created the sport as an anti-establishment pursuit, but in recent times, the phenomenal popularity of snowboarding has seen him cash in, not least in Japan, where 29% of Burton's total sales come from in 2003²³. 2006 saw Burton launch its first Japanese signature board, the Tadashi Fuse²⁴, an acknowledgement of the importance of the Japanese market. Whiting (2004: 206) puts forward the argument that sport has engendered a sense of individualism in Japan by looking at 'The Ichiro Phenomenon'²⁵. The success of the Japanese baseball player in the archetypal American sport was met with great pride and rampant commercialism at home as Ichiro's popularity went through the roof and the same has been happening with snowboarders. If further proof were needed about commodification, the fact that Terje Haakonsen, the rider who

²² OB – Out of Bounds

²³ <http://www.k5.com/page.asp?itemid=218>

²⁴ <http://www.burton.com/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=21>

²⁵ The Ichiro Phenomenon refers to the Japanese baseball star who transferred from the Orix Blue Wave in Japan to the Seattle Mariners in the United States where he became a huge success. He proved that Japanese could be successful in America playing the American game.

refused to compete at the Olympics is one of Burton's top pro-riders confirms this. Burton's self-styled rebel sport, which was banned, and still is by some ski resorts across the USA and Japan, has come in from the periphery in its infancy to the core as demonstrated by its popularity in New Zealand and Japan. Today, the currency of 'rebellion' is appropriated by advertisers and brand managers to sell the product. 'Street style' wear is de rigeur in contrast to the fluorescent-spandex sported by skiers, and urban graphics are displayed on 'decks'²⁶. Fig. 3 shows a magazine cover from Japan advertising next season's products;



Figure 3 - Japanese Snowboarding Magazine²⁷

Snowboarding has been built upon the image of rebellion, but is it really rebellious? It is an expensive sport that is practised by those who can afford it;

...snowboarders have, from the sports invention, been middle-class and upper-middle-class youth who can afford to buy snowboards, snowboarding gear, lift passes and transportation to resorts. (Donnelly 2006: 221)

²⁶ Wear is the snowboarding term for clothing; snowboards are referred to as decks.

²⁷ An interesting thing to note about the magazine is the inclusion of the 'SNOW girl's Bible'. This highlights the increasing popularity of snowboarding amongst girls and also the increasing feminization of the sport, which I will turn to later.

Snowboarders are marketed as rebellious youth, but the demographics of those who participate are those who have enough economic capital to continue in an expensive, middle-to-upper class sport...snowboarders as youth, might be at a power disadvantage but are not necessarily condemned to second class lives. (Heino 2000: 188)

In order to snowboard, you need two things; mountains and money²⁸. The nature of furiitaa work means that they can make the time to indulge in hobbies and parasaito shingeru have the weekends. In the era of rapid growth, Japanese have increasingly had the economic capital to pursue expensive hobbies. Herbig & Borstoff's (1995) article on Shinjinrui points out that after this growth, there developed a group who had the money and inclination to express themselves through their lifestyle. They could exchange their economic capital for cultural capital at a time when lifestyle choices and peer pressure were gaining in importance. Their dislike of elements of the corporate system (Kotani in Mathews & White 2004: 38) and the availability of a 'rebellious', expressive pursuit would seem to be a good match. Snowboarding has come along at a time when there has been increasing importance attached to image and making an impression on your peers. This is highlighted by Yamada (1999) in his polemic on Parasaito Shingeru and held up as a reason why young females choose to stay at home. They do this so they can spend more money on themselves to impress friends.

With its concentration on image and rebellion against mainstream culture, snowboarding is effectively offering an alternative lifestyle choice which challenges what Iida calls the patriarchal / hegemonic order of Japanese society (2005: 56). I chose to look at snowboarding because I am a rider who has spent considerable time in Japan and New Zealand with those Japanese who make this alternative lifestyle choice.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Why Snowboarding? If young Japanese are rejecting the traditional paths, snowboarders are perhaps one of the groups that you would expect to do so. This motivated the decision to

²⁸ Technically, you don't actually need mountains as the 'Ski Dubai' resort in the United Arab Emirates proves. They do though have a lot of money.

undertake research looking at Japanese snowboarders in a foreign country with the proposition that they make this decision because they partly feel let down by the social order and are willing to take advantage of opportunities in a different country. There were other alternative groups that I could have looked at, both inside Japan and abroad, for example the Harajuku Girls and Ganguro²⁹ in Tokyo, and surfers on the Gold Coast of Australia and the islands of Hawaii³⁰.

Why New Zealand? The decision to conduct research here was determined by the fact I have been there for the previous two seasons and I know there exists a sizeable Japanese community who spend the season here³¹. Another factor was the symbolic significance of potential subjects removing themselves from Japanese society by dint of their lifestyle choice. Having identified the group I wanted to learn more about, my next objective was to establish how to get the information I required to analyse social change in Japan. The plan was to spend one month in Methven, the base town for the ski resort of Mt Hutt, interviewing Japanese snowboarders and observing their interaction and behaviour; ethnography.

The main advantage of ethnography is that it enables the researcher to capture a snapshot of the group being studied in their 'natural environment'. It is a qualitative approach designed to gain an insight into their views and the choices they make. I used a variety of documents including academic articles, newspaper reports and observations taken from three years living in Japan to establish my background and what I am looking for in my study. To a lesser extent, I have also used a quantitative approach to analyse data concerning trends in the numbers of Japanese making alternative choices.

Ethnographic studies are not without their criticisms, for a start, they are time consuming and can be costly. In the case of my research, I looked at a general phenomenon from a relatively small sample. Snowboarders who go to New Zealand are not representative for all youth in Japanese society, or even those who make alternative lifestyle choices. This criticism is made by Yin;

²⁹ Ganguro are Japanese who dress in an extreme fashion, with dyed hair and extremely deep tans. They tend to 'hang around' areas in Tokyo such as Shinjuku and Ikebukuro.

³⁰ Whilst living in Japan, I had several Japanese friends who travelled the world surfing.

³¹ The south island of New Zealand has always appeared to be phenomenally popular with Japanese of all ages every time I have visited. Christchurch and Queenstown in particular are thronged with Japanese and increasingly Asians from different countries like China and South Korea.

Ethnographic case studies have been denigrated as having insufficient precision (quantification) objectivity or rigour (2003: 3)

My ethnographic approach is broken down into several parts. The first was to select, find and interview a reasonable number of Japanese snowboarders. The second was to observe the group, watching their behaviour and interaction whilst snowboarding, relaxing in the town and even whilst interviewing. The interview process was key to my research, giving me a chance to learn first-hand from those who have made alternative lifestyle choices. The observation element would enable me to see how they get on in New Zealand.

My research design was to conduct a series of recorded interviews, informal and formal with snowboarders, preferably those who were University graduates, male and female. During the day I would snowboard on the mountain and look to introduce myself to Japanese riders, arranging interviews in the restaurant at lunchtime, or perhaps more sensibly, in the town during the evening, which would enable me to 'set up' the interview. Although I had devised a set of questions I wanted to ask, I thought that unstructured interviews, especially in an informal setting would be more informative and enable me to develop a rapport with my subjects. I felt that if I was too formal, I might not be able to elicit truthful answers from my respondents. It was important to use my status as a snowboarder to gain access and more importantly, a sense of trust amongst my respondents. Later, I would reveal my academic intent. What I set out to find out was; What made them leave Japan? Why go New Zealand and how do you think the actions impact upon Japanese society?

Another concern was whether to do interviews on an individual basis or as a group. My preference was to do group interviews, especially in the evenings, as I felt a social, relaxed environment would encourage respondents to discuss their experiences in-depth. I was wary that one-on-one interviews might be halted by inhibitions on both parts. A big concern was the language barrier. Although I speak good Japanese and was comfortable asking certain questions in the language, I was worried my vocabulary might not extend far enough. In this regard, I thought it important to select respondents who had a good level of English, and also it would be essential to record interviews and have a dictionary present. Rubin & Rubin (1995: 44) stress the importance of being flexible, iterative and continuous when planning qualitative interviews, and this was an approach I sought to follow. As I had a month, I was happy to start with unstructured interviews as I could

follow up and refine where I thought it necessary. The aim was to find out why my respondents left home, how they felt about being labelled as 'selfish' and what they thought their experience in New Zealand would count for when they went back to Japan³². This approach allows for new topics or points of departure which I might not find out about with other methodological approaches. By asking general questions and enabling the respondent to 'tell a story', I could gain a unique insight into their world.

As a method, interviews fall between questionnaires and observation, allowing the researcher to delve into the background of the respondent. They are useful, but they do have their limitations. Just as ethnography is questioned as a method because of its lack of scientific precision, interviews too come in for criticism for not being replicable in the way that questionnaires or samples are. The more unstructured my interviews, the less replicable they become. Group interviews are often thought to provide more valid results. Haralambos cites the experiences of Paul Willis (1995: 842) stating that respondents are often more comfortable when surrounded by friends. Interviews are sometimes criticised in that the respondent may not give truthful answers, Haralambos (1995: 842) uses the example of Aaron Cicourel who raised the criticism that interviewees sometimes give the answers the interviewer wants to hear. When the language barrier is factored in, the difficulty in ascertaining truth becomes clear. As the interviewer, I have to be aware of the influence or bias that I might have in the process. Would the responses be the same if the interviews were being conducted by an elder Japanese lady for example? Silverman's study of industrialist's points out different interviewers can provoke different responses (Haralambos 1995: 842). Considering my role as researcher and interviewer led me to consider my status and the influence that personal interaction has in the interview process. Kvale stresses the value and importance of the interview as a technique.

A well carried out research interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights into his or her life. (Kvale 1996: 31)

Through the thought and planning that went into my interviews, this unique insight was what I sought to obtain.

³² None of my interviewees said they would stay in New Zealand. All intended to return to Japan.

3.2. Cultural Relativism

The Japan phenomenon poses a wide range of questions about the ethnocentric nature of Western Sociology. (Sugimoto 2002: 22)

In conducting research as a 'westerner' amongst Japanese snowboarders in New Zealand, the concept of culture, background and how this defines my approach, becomes important. As a British, Snowboarding youth, I belong to several different cultures / subcultures. In some cases I am an insider, and in others, an outsider to the group. Fig. 4 highlights my insider / outsider status in the realm of Japanese studies.

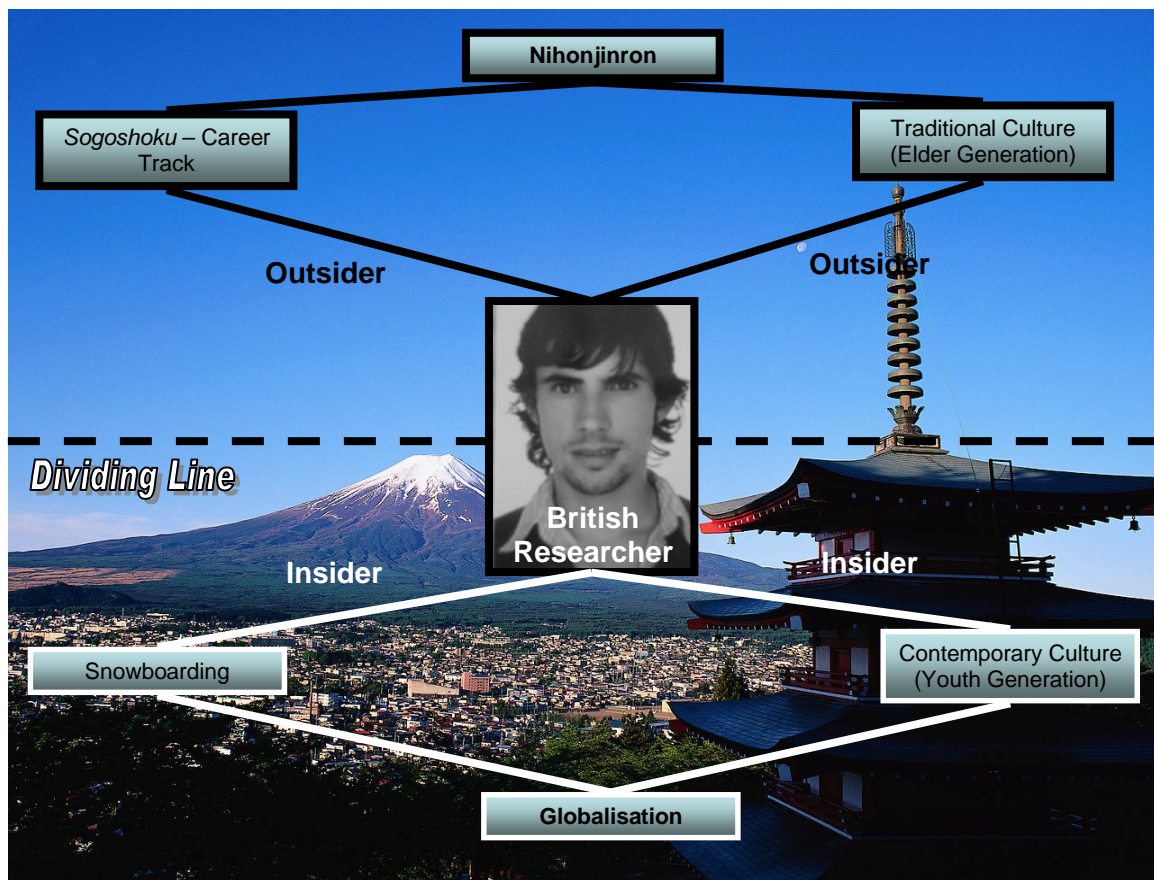


Figure 4 - My Cultural Relativism 33

This model attempts to highlight the theory of Cultural Relativism when conducting ethnography. The origins of this theory come from American anthropologist Franz Boas and have been

³³ I have also included a dividing line which highlights the difference between cultural ideals and expectations encapsulated in *Nihonjinron* – the discourse on unique Japanese identity and the alternative options available through globalisation.

developed further by protégés Ruth Benedict, famed for her work on Japan³⁴, and Margaret Mead in their ethnographic studies. My status as a participant observer means that I am central to the research as a member of some groups and an outsider to others. I am an experienced snowboarder, I wear the right gear and 'talk the lingo' so I am an accepted member of this subculture. I am young(ish) and fit into what might be described as contemporary culture, so I am an insider here too. However, I am not Japanese, so I don't fit into this grouping, nor am I member of the elder generation. So, when I conducted my research, it was imperative to think about which groups I belonged to and how this might influence my approach. A criticism here is that I did not conduct ethnography or interviews with the elder generation or those who have stayed on the *sogoshoku*. Instead, I have relied on a variety of texts, so my approach is biased towards the groups of which I am an insider. Where Sugimoto (2002: 22) questions the ethnocentric, universalism of Western sociology, I am applying a similar concept to the ethnocentric approach of mainstream Japanese when considering youth subcultures, without considering the viewpoints of other actors in society.

As a Brit who to a large extent has opted out of the UK's *sogoshoku* by moving to Japan, studying in Sweden and snowboarding in New Zealand, comparisons can be drawn between my decision and those made by the Japanese youth I am studying. Does this affect my objectivity as researcher? I was conscious of being overly-empathetic when considering the position of travelling snowboarders and about developing friendships with people I was studying. This leads onto an important aspect of Cultural Relativism; in essence, I have made a similar decision to them which undoubtedly motivated my research. The fundamental difference is how our decisions are viewed by our respective mainstream societies. The norms, values and culture of the society we come from define what societal expectations are, and just how our nonconformity is viewed by the elder generation. Essentially, if I was Japanese, I might be one of the youth this generation is concerned about – this is not so much the case in the UK as confirmed by my parents who see it as 'the normal thing to do in this day and age'.

The theory of Cultural Relativism makes the point that different cultures have different norms, values and expectations which apply to that particular group. They may even be changing in Japan

³⁴ The Chrysanthemum and the Sword

today. There is no universal principle. Kotani cites the example of a Finnish journalist who travelled to Japan with the presupposition that due to economic stagnation, there would be violent behaviour, alcohol and drugs on the streets. He was surprised to find that youth were happy to talk to him (in Mathews & White 2004: 33). Nonconformity / Deviance in one culture is different to that in another, it is subject to the interpretation of members of the community. In studying Japan, it is important to understand the cultural norms and values by which youth are expected to conform and when they were established, the essence of cultural relativism.

Diversity exists within Japan, so perhaps a more suitable phraseology might be 'sub-cultural relativism'.

3.3. Conducting Fieldwork

I planned to stay at Snow Denn Lodge, a youth hostel in Methven I had been to before. I knew that the owner employs several Japanese every year to cater for Japanese guests, so I assumed that this would be the best place to start meeting potential respondents. At the lodge, there were three Japanese working, two of whom were skiers, and one snowboarder. Both skiers had been to University, though the snowboarder had not. Here, I had to make the decision whether or not to broaden my sample to include skiers, who had also made a significant alternative lifestyle choice, and those who had not been to University. The importance of incorporating flexibility into the design of my study (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 44) came to light here.

How I met potential interviewee's was an important part of the process. I developed contacts through a variety of circumstances, once I sat down next to a Japanese rider³⁵ when a bus had broken down and another time when a Kiwi³⁶ friend picked up some Japanese friends on the way to the mountain. I found the 'chats' I had in these instances to be more spontaneous, informal, informative and crucially, easier to understand. One problem, as encountered by Ken Pryce in his study of West Indians in Bristol was the difficulty of recording these conversations (Haralambos 1995: 846). Often, I was forced to rely on a faithful reproduction from memory of what was said.

³⁵ Snowboarder

³⁶ Kiwi is the nickname for somebody from New Zealand

Dressed in my 'wear'³⁷ and 'slouching' along in the typical way 'riders' do, my image matched that of fellow 'riders' which helped with introductions. A good trick I picked up was to wear my 'comedy' Japanese T-shirts³⁸, and they certainly helped to get the attention of Japanese who saw them. A typical *jiko shokai* (self-introduction) establishing a rapport I could build on was;

Nick: Genki? Kyou no yuki wa dou t'omoite? (Hey! What d'ya think of the snow today?)

Japanese Snowboarder: Eh? Nihongo shabberu? (You speak Japanese?)

Nick: Hai, chotto dakke (Yes, just a little)

Japanese Snowboarder: Sugei (Cooooo!!!!)

Having established contacts, I was able to set up further meetings in the local pub and the hostel where I could set-up more structured interviews. I made the point of asking them to bring friends so I could meet as many people who might fit my criteria; a snowball effect. Another consideration was gender based. Should I try and balance my sample by having an equal number of males and females, after all, both sexes have been making these choices. Through the course of my research, I interviewed 13 Japanese, sometimes on an individual basis, other times as a group. A concern I raised in these interviews was to ask whether those I interviewed would like to remain anonymous in this work. As might be considered typical for snowboarders, a common response was to shrug shoulders and say '*shinpai ja nai*' (no worries), so I have used the real names³⁹.

I would concur with the example used by Haralambos citing Paul Willis (1995: 842) positive assertions about the validity of group interviews after conducting my interviews. Everyone seemed more comfortable. They were useful in that I could observe the interaction between Japanese, although sometimes separate conversations would break out and I would find it difficult to keep up, given they were speaking Japanese. It was difficult to ascertain any rebellion in language, which would be easier for me to do if in English. I speak *kansai-ben*⁴⁰ (Kansai dialect) but where English speaking riders use a word like 'sick' to explain something good, I would struggle to understanding

³⁷ Snowboarding Clothes

³⁸ I have 2 t-shirts, one which says *hijoguchi* (fire exit) underneath the fire exit sign and the other which is a sign from a convenience store, explaining that it is illegal for Japanese under the age of 20 to buy alcohol and tobacco.

³⁹ I was quite happy to keep names anonymous, but I feel the indifference shown by snowboarders was instructive in itself.

⁴⁰ *Kansai-ben* is a dialect of Japanese spoken in Osaka and the Kansai region that I learned whilst in Japan.

the meaning conveyed if in Japanese⁴¹. It was essential to record these interviews, but even transcribing them, it was difficult to understand given new words and the multitude of voices.

The purpose of the interviews was to establish why my subjects had a) taken up snowboarding and b) decided to pursue it to such an extent that they opted out of the *shushoku katsudo*. The reason for choosing snowboarding university graduates as my sample is because I felt this group were the ones who were amongst the most affected by the push and pull factors of globalisation. Had they lost their belief in the promises made by the Japanese social order? What was the attraction of travelling to and snowboarding in New Zealand?

4. Analysis

4.1. Pushed out of Japan?

Through the course of my fieldwork, I managed to find a number of university graduates, male and female who had been to University then chose not to pursue a career. In addition, I interviewed snowboarders who had not been to University but also opted not to go for a career so I found my criteria being further stretched⁴², again, flexibility and reflexivity was essential. A group I got to know well through playing football with were on a 'snow-camp'⁴³. The members were aged between 14 and 21, none of whom had been to University, yet they had made the decision to go to New Zealand to develop as snowboarders. This led me to question whether I had selected the right age and education group, yet I decided to proceed along these lines, largely because I felt that those who had been to University were making a bigger break from society. After graduating or finishing school, they had chosen to pursue snowboarding, and in order to pay for this, they took up a series of jobs in between the season in Japan and travelling to New Zealand to snowboard. One worked as a chef in Denny's⁴⁴, another as a Plum Farmer, several in *conbeni*'s⁴⁵ and one in a

⁴¹ As a Japanese would if after doing something cool on a snowboard, he was told in English that it was 'sick'. Recourse to a dictionary might upset him.

⁴² I interviewed snowboarders who had not been to University and skiers who had graduated from University.

⁴³ <http://www.k-snow.com/> is the homepage for this camp. A photo-diary of the 2006 camp can be found at: http://www.k-snow.com/cgi-bin/sfs6_diary_001/sfs6_diary.cgi?action=month&year=2006&month=08

⁴⁴ American chain restaurant in Japan

⁴⁵ *conbeni* – 24 hour convenience store

glass making factory; employment which might typically be described as furiitaa. What I found from several respondents was a strong desire to do something 'different' before settling into a career. This dictated their decision not to enter the sogoshoku straight after graduating.

Japanese Names	
Males	Females
Osamu	Naho
Daisuke	Rina
Taki	Ryouko
Tomo	Momo
Masa	Junko
Takeshi	
Yuki	
Hide	

Table 1 - List of interviewees names by gender

A significant group encountered in New Zealand were those who graduated, enrolled on the sogoshoku but then dropped out. Mathews indicates that 30% of graduates leave their jobs within three years (2004: 125). Genda & Rebeck point out that there is a high rate of job-changing among all Japanese under the age of 30 (2000: 90), further hinting at frustration with the Japanese system. Most Japanese I met in New Zealand were in their late 20's and early 30's, the age group most affected by the 2000 nadir for graduate employment opportunities (see Fig. 1). Some had been returning to New Zealand over a period of years, where others had just quit their jobs and decided to travel. One reason for doing this before the age of 30 is that the age limit for a tourist working visa in New Zealand is 30, meaning that this was the last chance to work in an English speaking country⁴⁶. Osamu, a skier, said this was his specific motivation for quitting his job and deciding to travel; he wanted to do it whilst he had the chance. Like others, he did not find his job interesting, or stimulating and he felt that he needed a big change. My respondents in New Zealand did not seem too concerned by their decision to opt out of the sogoshoku and thought the extra skills and experience they would obtain would stand them in good stead⁴⁷. Taki expressed some jealousy over the fact his friends from school and university now had families and good careers, but he

⁴⁶ The age limit for a working visa in the UK and the USA is 25.

⁴⁷ This is a trend that occurs in the UK, in fact, I subscribe to it myself, and I know lots of people from Sweden, France and beyond who have made similar decisions.

remained happy with his decision to snowboard. These decisions hint that dissatisfaction with the current career track system is rife. This is alluded to by Ono in suggesting reasons why Japanese youth leave home to go to Thailand;

Young Japanese people go to Thailand in order to get away from an ordinary life, structure of constraints, and sort of 'hopeless Japan', and to gain an alternative lifestyle in which they find optimism and vigour. (2005: 11)

The question is do they return with renewed optimism and vigour? My respondents certainly felt that they would be going back better equipped. Several gave the direct answer that their time in New Zealand was designed to increase their employability. If it is difficult to find employment at home, and there is the opportunity to live abroad and pick up a skill like English that might make you more employable when you return, the attractiveness of this choice is increased. In one sense, they are 'hedging their bets' against a demand for an internationalised labour force being needed in the Japanese economy. 'Returnees'⁴⁸ have not always been welcomed back to Japan, far from it, a point raised by Mori in his chapter on Japanese with degrees from foreign universities (in Mathews & White 2004: ch9).

The relationship between children and parents formed a central part of my questioning and conversations. As parents represent the 'elder generation', I made the assumption that generational conflict would exist within the household. To my surprise, this was not always the case, and more often parents were supportive of their children's decision to skip the *sogoshoku* and live for themselves. Naho mentioned that her father was jealous of her 'maverick' streak and expressed the sentiment that he wished he could have been like her when he was young. Rina's parents, although concerned with her travelling, 'admired' her sense of adventure and wished they had the opportunity and availability to do the same thing. When I asked if they wanted to live the life their parents did, all the respondents, whilst expressing respect for them said they did not want to end up doing the same job. I found that this was a key motivating factor for deciding to travel to New Zealand amongst a large number of respondents. This was the clearest indication of dissatisfaction with the traditional social order. Nakano & Wagatsuma discuss the 'inter-generational alliance between mother and daughter' which has developed in Japan (in Mathews & White 2004: 146) and Orenstein mentions mothers jealousy of their daughters, so much so that

⁴⁸ Japanese who have lived abroad in a foreign country for several years.

they live their lives through them and encourage them to be 'selfish' (2001). Kotani's article (in Mathews & White 2004: 34) on the passivity of youth talks of the advocacy of a *tomodachi oyako*⁴⁹ relationship which has emerged in the 1990's. This has become the dominant mode of parent-child relationships today. If anything, parents were supportive of their children's decisions.

It is interesting to consider the gender aspect here, where mothers and daughters form an alliance. There seems to be a difference based along gender lines, perhaps because the expectations for males and females in Japanese society are different. Some males I interviewed mentioned that their fathers were not keen on them taking time out to go to New Zealand, but respected their decisions. Daisuke, who worked for his father as a builder said he was fortunate that he was his boss, because he found it easier to take time off. He thought living abroad would improve his English and give him a good chance of getting a better job when he returned to Japan. There was a divide between the reaction of parents whose children took up snowboarding because it was cool, and those who had grown up going to ski-resorts. Taki and Naho, two riders who grew up near the mountains mentioned their parents stressing the importance of nature in their lives. They were quite happy to see them developing this bond with nature. This bond represents a continuity that is passing from generation to generation, so we see here that youth do pay some attention to their elders.

Mathews & White (2004: 3) consider Margaret Mead's argument that each generation grow up in a technologically different world as technology advances. Rather than children learning from adults, as is the case in a postfigurative society, adults are learning from their children; society is becoming prefigurative. They state that the technology based generation gap exists today, especially in terms of mastery of computers and the internet, leading to 'fundamentally different ways of thinking'. An interesting observation was that most male respondents had worked or been educated in the computer / technology industry⁵⁰. Their experience was certainly different to that of their parents due to technological change, and it seems safe to assume that their thinking has also been changed by this background. They have grown up in a different working environment,

⁴⁹ *Tomodachi oyako* – parent and child as friends

⁵⁰ At Snow Denn, Hide and Osamu had both worked in the computer industry. Several Japanese I met on the mountain also worked in IT, including one who worked in the internet porn industry. 2 weeks after arriving, Tomo arrived at Snow Denn. Like Osamu, he was a computer graduate from Aizu University.

dominated by computers. The very act of working, studying or relaxing on a computer confers individuality. For hikikomori, a computer often represents the only form of contact with the outside world.

4.2. Pulled into New Zealand?

A desire to learn English in a foreign country was a big reason for choosing to go abroad. Naho, an International Relations graduate from Kyoto University spent a year studying English in California and Tomo, an Aizu computing graduate did a year at High School in Western Australia. This gave them a taste for living abroad and travelling. Several respondents travelled to New Zealand to enrol in language schools before heading to Methven to improve on what they had learned by working in ski-lodges and restaurants, gaining valuable work experience⁵¹. A common link between the Japanese I interviewed, especially females is that their introduction to living abroad, came from deciding to study English in a different country. Females certainly seem more interested in learning English, something I found whilst working on the JET Programme. Naho told me that she would be quite happy to settle down in an English speaking country with a gaijin (foreigner), where Taki was intent on settling down in Japan with a Japanese girl.⁵² Through the course of my ethnography, I discovered that there is a gender difference in the way males and females approach life abroad. Males tended to see time in New Zealand as transitional before they returned to life in Japan, compared to females who were more open to the possibility of settling abroad. This says something about the status of males and females in Japanese society and the differences encountered in different countries. As I proceeded through my fieldwork, the topic of gender difference in the reasoning behind going to New Zealand and the expectations of what this decision meant for their futures became more apparent. A common response to the question of why go to New Zealand was the desire to do something different. Taki and Naho summed the feeling up when they taught me some new Japanese with their answer; “waga jinsei ni kui nashi”

⁵¹ Of the Japanese I met in Methven, 3 worked at Snow Denn Lodge, where I stayed, 2 out Skiwi House across the road, 3 more at the Thai restaurant and more besides throughout the town.

⁵² After living in Japan for 3 years, I have noticed that there is an imbalance between the numbers of Japanese girls dating or getting married to foreign (typically British / American) compared to males getting married to ‘western’ women. In fact, I know of relatively few Japanese men with ‘western’ girlfriends, yet most of my male friends who have lived in Japan have dated Japanese girls. A substantial number are now married.

(to live life with no regrets). Although both genders share this same sentiment, it became apparent through interviews and observations that they seek and take different things from the experience.

Taki, an individual symbiotic with the natural world said that it was the beauty of New Zealand that appealed to him. He proved to be exactly the kind of respondent I was looking for before I started my fieldwork, and if anything, I was a little in awe of him when I conducted interviews. A pro-rider in Japan, regarded as one of the best at Mt. Hutt, he explained to me that it was the difference to Japan, the wide-open spaces, the laid-back attitude of the people and the excellent fishing opportunities that tempted him back year after year⁵³. An economics graduate from Tokyo Metropolitan University, he rejected the notion that his ideas were selfish and that he was a burden for the elder generation in Japanese society. He argued that his experience in New Zealand gave him a new perspective and respect for life in Japan by allowing him to view it from the outside. An intelligent, thoughtful individual, he expressed pride in his identity, but thought Japan sometimes needed to modernise to keep up with the rest of the world. His plan was to return to New Zealand one more time before turning his attention to a career in law, but he stressed now was a time for living and learning. This view was shared by another interviewee, Masa, who explained that he thought 30 was the right age to start a career. Up till then was 'playtime'. Masa's incredible story had taken him from driving taxi's at the resort of Whistler in Canada, to spending time with Maori tribes in New Zealand. He had started snowboarding because he thought it looked cool and he could meet 'hot chicks'. Referring to friends at home who were on the *sogoshoku*, he said simply, 'their priorities are different' He taught me the word *chyaranperan* (half-hearted / sloppy), which he used to explain his approach to career employment. His father had worked for the post office for 40 years and he did not want to do the same thing, he wanted to learn about the world around him whilst having fun until life got serious at 30.

⁵³ He mentioned that next year will be his last as he hopes to go back to university to pursue a career in law.

5. Evaluation

5.1. Snowboarding: Rebellion or Progression?

Looking at snowboarding as a sport, I learned that it was often the children of skiers who took it up, not as an act of rebellion against their parents, but because they just wanted to try something new. Naho, who had been skiing since she was 2 years old, fell into this category. Observations at Mt. Hutt led me to question the currency of 'rebellion'. There is a very specific Japanese way of snowboarding which distinguishes it from other nationalities, although it goes beyond 'wear'. They may dress like delinquents, and deliberately cultivate this image, but never in a million years would I describe them as 'rebels'. Even self-proclaimed 'bad-boys' were polite, deferential and never jumped a queue. The only exceptions to this rule I came across were two teenagers from the Snow Camp who had a bit of attitude. They liked to use graphic sexual language when talking to me, which made me laugh. When speaking English or Japanese with me, none of the respondents used the 'sick bro' lexicon favoured by Kiwi snowboarders. When I first met Daisuke he projected the 'gangster' snowboarding image, but through my time in Methven, I found him to be polite, considerate and enthusiastic to talk, especially in English! In interviews, respondents explained how they were looking forward to making a contribution to Japanese society. They were surprisingly keen to talk to me and always respectful. If I was interviewing snowboarders from a different country, I'm not sure this would be the case, and perhaps it would be different if I was Japanese. However, Japanese were keen to be a part of the supra-national snowboarder identity. Snowboarding gave them the opportunity to make friends with different nationalities as a snowboarder. 'Rebel' is little more than an image in my eyes, but it is not my interpretation that really matters, I am not blaming them for malaise in Japanese society.

Iida suggests that the obsession with image has brought genders closer together, forming a sort of youth alliance;

The decline of corporate masculine culture in post-bubble Japan provided young men and women with renewed opportunities to explore and assert new gender identities outside those conforming to the hegemonic ideal...Strong resistance to these new attitudes on the part of the guardians of hegemonic

discourse seem to have created a setting in which both genders found each other as new allies. (Iida 2005: 61)

This closing of the gender gap is referred to as 'the feminization of masculinity' by Iida and can be seen throughout urban Japan today⁵⁴. As Heino (200: 188) suggests, snowboarding has closed the gender gap faster than any other sport. Observations in New Zealand taught me that there were just as many female snowboarders as there were male, and even in their dress, they looked quite similar, with Japanese males growing their hair longer and wearing what might traditionally be termed, girls colours. All the snowboarders were extremely image-conscious, certainly compared to skiers. In fact, it was quite easy to tell the difference between Japanese skiers and snowboarders in town. The colour for the season in New Zealand was pink, for 'dudes' and 'chicks'! The photo below offers pictorial evidence of this particular trend.



Figure 5 - A colourful posse of riders; Daisuke, the author, Takeshi

It is not just in clothes and image that the gender gap has blurred, Yuki, a snowboarder who was on holiday for a week, told me over a game of pool that he was a personal shopper in Nagoya.

⁵⁴ A walk around Tokyo or reading a Japanese magazine for teenagers highlight this trend. <http://www.gatsby.jp/index.html> is a website for men's grooming products where this trend can also be seen.

When I asked Taki to meet me in the pub, he asked his friend Naho to come along. He confided in me that he relied on Naho in New Zealand given her competency in English and her self-confidence, saying 'she's unladylike – like a brother'. This was meant as a joke, the two were obviously close, but I was surprised to learn that they only knew each other and met in New Zealand. They did not have a relationship in Japan and this led me to wonder if gender relations are different within the snowboarding subculture and outside the traditional social order of Japan, or if Naho was unique. In group interviews and observing interaction sometimes I witnessed what might be described as typical interaction between Japanese in accordance with culture and it was noticeable that when I was present, this interaction did change a little. Another example was that when talking to Rina, Osamu and Hide in Snow Denn Lodge, Rina would lead the conversation (she had the best English ability) but if it was just the three of them, she was a little quieter. However, it does seem clear that the gender gap is narrowing.

5.2. Japan, Globalisation and Youth Culture

How do the Japanese feel about globalisation and the opportunities it offers youth in contemporary society? Debate on Japanese identity has come into sharper focus in the era of globalisation, as Japan increasingly defines itself against others as discussed by Clammer (Japan and Its Others: 2001: 12). In seeking a suitable role in the international arena, Japan must decide whether to do so by reaffirming an ethnocentric sense of identity in the face of what some describe as western cultural imperialism⁵⁵ or submit to the interdependence and integration implicit in Globalisation, replete with the opening of borders and changing of working practices which threatens major change to the Japanese identity. One area where Japan has been successful has been adapting the global to the local. Iwabuchi refers to Japan as a 'transformer sub-station' for cultural produce coming from the 'West', adapting it to the domestic, Asian market and beyond. This has happened in the manufacturing industries and now it is happening in sports. Whiting (2004: 48) refers to 'The Ichiro Phenomenon' and how this has helped Japan to overcome an inferiority complex using success on the field in baseball. Clammer points to the way the Japanese have adopted baseball and football, making a successful version of their own; the J-League (2001: 5). Kinnvall and Jönsson call this 'Glocalization' (2005: 249), appropriating the global to the local. The

⁵⁵ It is also known as Coca-colonialism or McDonaldsization. Edward Said discusses this in his book 'Culture and Imperialism' which considers the West-east direction of globalisation.

snowboarding magazine (Fig 3 p16) is a good example of how Japanese have popularised an American sport and even have an American, Shaun White on the cover – ‘The Hollywood Factor’. Iida applies this idea of appropriation to youth culture;

Japanese youths attempt to create alternative ideal types by selectively employing a quota of foreign images and combining them into native content to obtain ‘effective’ – different but familiar enough – outcomes. (2005: 66)

This was clear on the mountain, where Japanese ‘riders’ have developed ‘bandit’ or ‘mob’ style⁵⁶ riding, appropriating gangster culture seen in hip-hop videos and movies from America. Woodward (2003: 132) talks of a ‘globally comprehensible culture’ typified by TV programmes like MTV. Takashi told me his ‘fashion style’ was influenced by the rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg:



Figure 6 - Daisuke and Takashi demonstrating the influence of Snoop Doggy Dogg⁵⁷

This style involved wearing bandana’s over the face, trousers very low and ‘camo’⁵⁸ jackets. It was noticeable that the majority of Japanese snowboarders incorporated this style, males and females,

⁵⁶ ‘Mob Style’ was the phrase Taki used to describe the snowboarding image he was projecting.

⁵⁷ Although influenced by Snoop Doggy Dogg’s style, Takashi’s music tastes were a little different. He was a huge and knowledgeable fan of British Indie music.

⁵⁸ Camo – Camouflage / Military style

although they combined it with pink, colourful 'wear' and teddy bears on key chains. How the Japanese have embraced snowboarding was brought up in the feature-film, 'First Descent', where Travis Rice, an American, Burton pro-snowboarder travelled to Tokyo Dome to take place in a 'Big Air' competition. At the top of the platform just before launching into his run, he surveyed the crowd, remarking;

Is this what snowboarding has come to? (First Descent: 2006)⁵⁹

This mix of influences is referred to by Naomi Klein's 'No Logo' (in Woodward 2003: 131) as a cultural 'masala' that has been utilised, particularly in advertising. Today, the Japanese are as much a part of that masala as the Americans they learned snowboarding from.

5.3. The Elder Generation's Response

The reaction of the elder generation to the problems encountered after the economic stagnation and employment problems has tended to focus on prescriptions for mending the economy through the core values that got Japan into its position of strength in the first place; hard work, consensus and harmony, with a token concession to internationalisation. This has meant a return to *Nihonjinron*, the discourse on a unique sense of Japanese identity (Burgess 2001). In the 1990's, Sugimoto (2002: 16) argues that the Japanese lost confidence in promoting this 'cultural uniqueness' owing to economic problems, but it has resurfaced. This has been interpreted as a retreat to Japanese nationalism, which has made the rest of Asia wary. Perhaps the key institution for socializing young Japanese is the education system. It is within the schooling system that the young are taught how to be good Japanese, with reinforcement from the family, in particular, the *kyoiku-mama*⁶⁰. Noticeably, it is the education system that has been targeted by the Government as the place to reinvigorate a sense of commitment to 'Japaneseness'. After interviewing on the mountain, I would question whether this has disappeared, but the elder generation seem to think it has. When considering *Nihonjinron*, an article in *The Economist* (Dec 23rd 2006), describes how Bunmei Ibuki, Japan's Education Minister, has insisted that elementary school pupils acquire a

⁵⁹ *First Descent* is a film made by Burton tracking the development of snowboarding and how it has been popularised across the world. Specific attention was given to Japan and the importance of this market for the company and the industry as a whole.

⁶⁰ *Kyoiku-mama* meaning 'education mother' is the name given to those who dedicate their parental lives to the education of their children, driving them to school and helping them with their homework.

'Japanese Passport' through a grasp of the country's history and culture. The Japanese response to challenge has been to boost patriotism amongst the young. (The Economist - Dec 23rd 2006: 102) However, the article suggests that perhaps the fact that youth are ignoring the traditional emphasis of the education system is helping them develop the creative skills they need in the modern world, which I would agree with. Here lies juxtaposition between what the elder generation in Japan see as being the way forward for their country and what foreign commentators think is best for Japan. Essentially, what we are considering is how a nation state deals with the threat to its sovereignty and decision making capabilities that globalisation poses. Vlastos raises the point that the Japanese nation-state appears to be moving towards what Hobsbawm calls 'Invented Traditions', to rein in tendencies towards making lifestyle choices and identity practices that go against traditional expectations.

[There is a] tendency to invent traditions to pervasive feelings of anxiety over new, more sharply delineated and disturbing social divisions. (Hobsbawm in Vlastos 2002: 9)

This is a warning of a retreat to ethnocentrism which is also alluded to by The Economist in their article on educational reforms (Dec 23rd 2006: 102) and the debates over the return of the Hinomaru (Japanese Flag) and Kimigayo (Japanese National Anthem) This indicates a return to Japanese nationalism as the best way to deal with the foreign problems that have accompanied Globalisation, rather than embrace an international or multicultural approach. Youth hold the key to the maintenance of the social order and education reforms have been designed to reinvigorate a sense of pride in Japanese nationality, yet it does not seem to have diminished in my respondents, especially the males. Snowboarding is one of several identities they subscribe to in contemporary society, but their Japaneseness remains the most important. I would suggest more should be done to sort the graduate employment system, perhaps by extending the 'window of opportunity' for employment applications or recognising the value that international experience might potentially bring to the workplace, as is noted by the Government's 2005 'Youth Independence and Challenge Plan'.

5.4. A declining trend?

I was surprised to learn there has actually been a decline in the numbers participating in snow sports and travelling to New Zealand during their winter season as seen in the table below.

Sex / Year	2002	2003	2004
Male	7.1%	5.1%	5.7%
Female	2.8%	2.8%	3.1%

Table 2 - Percentage of Japanese population snowboarding.

Source: Japan Statistics Bureau⁶¹

Participation rates slumped at the beginning of the decade but are increasing again. Conversely, participation in skiing has declined from 18.6% of the population in 1995 to 8% in 2004 for males (12.2% to 5.8% over the same time period for females.)⁶² Another indicator of this trend is the decline in the numbers of young Japanese going to New Zealand during the ski season as seen in the graph below;

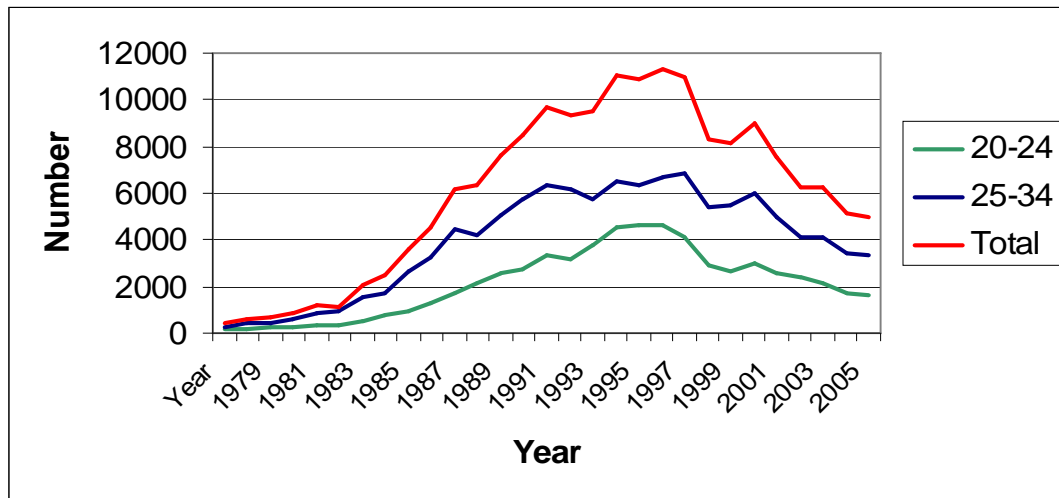


Figure 7 - Japanese Arrivals in New Zealand by Age Group.

Source: www.stats.govt.nz/tourism

Based on empirical observations from previous years spent in New Zealand, this was not something I expected to see. There are several possible explanations for these figures. For

⁶¹ <http://www.stat.go.jp/data/nenkan/zuhvou/v2326000.xls> - Statistics regarding the percentage of the population snowboarding have only been processed since the year 2000, perhaps highlighting the institutional disregard for the sport.

⁶² The statistics suggest that snow sports are nearly twice as popular amongst males, however, there were still a considerable number riding in New Zealand and there always seem to be in Japan.

example, in considering declining numbers of tourists after the year 2000, it is important to remember the effect that the SARS⁶³ crisis and Bird Flu had on numbers of Japanese travelling. However, as we can see from the decline in numbers participating in snow sports and the decrease in numbers travelling occurring in the late 1990's, something happened before to cause this. The slow-down in the economy has led to fewer young Japanese travelling to New Zealand, suggesting those who do go must be committed snowboarders. So, what are the potential reasons for the decline in snowboarding and tourism? Is it too expensive, or is it possible that Japanese are cutting back on hobbies and pursuits aware of the economic situation and difficulties in finding a job? Is it possible they are listening to the elder generation and acting upon the suggestions made about contributing effectively to Japanese society?

6. Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the Japanese I spent time with in Methven fitted into two categories. Those who deferred entering the career track because of snowboarding, which took them to New Zealand and those who entered the track, but subsequently rejected it and sought challenge in New Zealand, whilst they had the chance. A combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors lay behind this decision. The availability and opportunity to do things like snowboarding, plus the fact that it is a cool thing to do was apparent. Seeing counterparts from 'the west' do the same thing before pursuing their careers was also a factor – 'If they can do it, why can't we?' Allied to the difficulties in the job market and the frustrations encountered within Japanese corporations, it was obvious why some made an alternative lifestyle choice. This idea of 'chance' is crucial, as virtually all respondents had the intention of returning to Japan to pursue a career, hopefully a better one given the extra skills they acquired.

My assertion is that Japanese Snowboarders in New Zealand, as part of Youth Culture are leading Japan towards a new society, one which 'tips its cap' to 'Japaneseness' but recognises that increasingly, Japan is part of and subject to influence from the rest of the world. Snowboarding does lead to individualism and a drive to prove ability to the international community, but I also believe it helps social relations between genders and different nationalities. Snowboarders are not

⁶³ SARS – Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

'rebels', nor are they social deviants. There is a 'Generation Gap', but this is because today's youth have grown up in a completely different society to that of their parents. Most parents were actually proud of their children's decisions and saw them as a vanguard for the next generation, rather than selfish individuals. After considering respondents sentiments, I would suggest that they are likely to become the next generation of salarymen in Japan, albeit with more comfort on the international stage owing to their experiences.

I think one change that Japan is facing concerns women. Discourse on parasaito shingeru suggests this is already a major issue, but I would contend that dissatisfaction with the current social order is leading a significant number of females to seek opportunities and partners abroad, so much so that they completely opt out of Japanese society. This is something which needs to be followed up with substantial research, but through the course of my study, I detected a strong desire for change, and an increasing willingness to make significant alternative lifestyle choices.

It is said that travel broadens horizons, and I agree. A distinct advantage of Japanese mixing with people from all over the world, as happened in New Zealand, is that it helps destroy any inferiority complex that might exist. There is still some way to go before a complete integration; language still provides a significant barrier, but Japanese youth are becoming more comfortable on the international scene. Perhaps the goals set out in Merton's 'Value Consensus' and the Japanese cultural ideal are being changed by youth to incorporate a more international outlook. It certainly helps to counter the dangerous rhetoric of nationalism.

Maybe these 'selfish' individuals could prove to be a source of hope for Japanese society.

Japanese Words

Chu-hyogaki	employment ice age
Chyaranperan	half hearted / sloppy
Conbeni	convenience store
Furiitaa	free-time / part-time worker
Gaiatsu	external pressure
Gaijin	foreigner
Ganguro	girls dressed in gothic style
Hijoguchi	emergency exit
Hikikomori	individuals who withdraw from society
Hinomaru	Japanese flag
Jiko shokai	self-introduction
Juku	cram school
Kansai-ben	Kansai dialect
Kimigayo	Japanese national anthem
Kojinshugi	individualism
Kyoiku-mama	education-mother
Naiatsu	internal pressure
Parasaito Shingeru	parasite singles
Shinjinrui	new breed
Shinpai janai	no worries
Shushoku katsudo	career track
Sogoshoku	career path
Sotokomori	Japanese who withdraw from society to a different country
Tomodachi oyako	parent and child as friends
Wagamama	selfish
Waga jinsei ni kui nashi	to live life with no regrets

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