CHAPTER 4

The Emerging New Values: Social Transformation and the Japanese Middle Class

...Japan's new breed of slackers: young people who feel at ease picking and choosing their lifestyles, a no-no for their fathers who were derided abroad as corporate animals. Mr Kimijima says he has 'no intention of working at the expense of my private life.' 'Japan used to have lifetime employment and a seniority-based pay system on the assumption that its economy would keep expanding,' he says. 'We are no longer living in such an era...'[...] Ryuichiro Matsubara, an economics professor at the University of Tokyo, says: 'What is unique to Japan is that those called 'lower society' are quite satisfied with their lives.'... (Editorial, Agence France-Presse, Asia-Pacific Section in South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, May 16, 2006, p. 9)

This newspaper article describes new lifestyle values among young Japanese. As the young interviewee in this article notes, younger generations of Japanese have started to question the traditional self-sacrificing work ethic and company loyalty shown by their parents' generation. One of the studies that highlight this new trend in lifestyle value is Atsushi Miura's (2005) book, Karyū Shakai (lower class society). Miura presents a new term, karyū shakai (lower class society), describing a newly emerged strata of the population that can be characterised by lack of enthusiasm to study or work and an explicit preference to “be myself.” Furthermore, the emergence of freeters, “free-minded part-timers,” who willingly live on part-time income, has increasingly been regarded as a social problem. In the middle of the 1990s, the number of freeters reached 1.5 million (Kosugi 2003; Ministry of Labour 1998; JIL 2001; Yajima and Mimizuka 2001). Unlike traditional Japanese salary workers, freeters were not strongly tied to their companies; rather, they preferred to focus on actively pursuing their personal lives with a relative degree of autonomy and thus enjoyed greater flexibility in making their lifestyle choices.

The 1990s, in Japan, is often referred to in the media as the “lost decade.” The myth of efficient Japanese-style management (e.g. Abegglen and Stalk 1985) had collapsed in the face of long-term recession and stagnation. The burst of the “bubble economy” at the beginning of the 1990s triggered a wave of corporate bankruptcies and a marked increase in unemployment. Several major
incidents, such as the Tokyo subway sarin gas attack by a religious cult in 1995 and the serial killing of children by a child murderer in Kobe in 1997, came to symbolise the underlying anomie of Japanese society. When, in 1995, the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake exposed the vulnerabilities of Japan’s quakeproof building construction, it also shook the firmly held myths of safety that prevailed within the Japanese psyche. During this time, Japanese society underwent several important changes, including the rationalisation of business and the restructuring of employment practices, which helped pave the way for the emergence of new lifestyle values.

In this chapter I will explore the relationship between such changes in Japanese society and the emergence of new lifestyle values within the Japanese middle class. I argue that, by fostering these values, the social changes of the 1990s have acted as “push factors” behind the increase in Japanese outbound migration. In addressing this claim, I will describe the key features of the structural transformation of Japanese society in the 1990s, before demonstrating, with reference to interview data, how these developments have altered lifestyle values and interest in migration among Japanese.

The Disillusionment with the Myth of Corporate Japan

The burst of the bubble economy in 1991 represents a major socioeconomic turning point in recent Japanese history. So severe was its impact that Japanese companies were forced to radically rethink and transform their management styles in order to become more efficient (Takeuchi 1999; Yashiro 1997). These changes had widespread implications throughout the broader Japanese society (Nakamura 2004; Yashiro 1997).

The bubble economy, characterised by a prevalent “speculation mania,” along with rapid increases in both stock and land prices, began in the latter half of the 1980s. The ultra-low interest rates at that time made it easier for businesses to acquire loans. As the bubble—the realised capital gain—began to emerge, the economy started to suffer from the nonperforming loans in the market economy. During the peak of the bubble economy, the actual rate of economic growth hit 6.2% in 1988, effective demand-supply ratio of the labour force crossed 1% (MoL 1998), and the unemployment rate dropped to 2.1% in 1991 (MHLW 2003a).

The collapse of the bubble economy played out across differing sectors of the economy. In early 1990, while the economy still seemed to be booming, stock prices began to decrease. During the same period, land prices were still increasing; yet in 1991 they too began to drop sharply. Following this decline in