CHAPTER TWENTY

ANCESTORS, BURIAL RITES, AND RURAL DEPOPULATION IN JAPAN

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1. Introduction

This chapter explores the intersection of demographic change—specifically increased longevity, decreased fertility, and rural depopulation—and interactions between living and dead. I consider the influence of population decline on the care of deceased family members and argue that rural depopulation in Japan needs to be understood as having an influence not only on the living but also on the dead.

When one walks into city hall in many rural municipalities in Japan, it is not uncommon to find a chart on the wall, placed in a prominent area, that shows the current population of the town or city, with an indication of the increase or decrease since the previous month. Local newsletters that update townspeople on government activities often show births and deaths and contain a population count as well. These reminders that depopulation is a concern, however, are not necessary for most people living in rural Japan; one merely needs to walk along the main street in many towns to be aware of the population problems everyone is confronting. The only faces one is likely to see in any abundance are those of the elderly (cf. Traphagan 2000). Young adults are relatively few in number, as are children. Population, and particularly depopulation, is a central issue confronting rural Japan, particularly in an era where it is not uncommon to find villages and towns that have elder populations (defined as those 65 and above) comprising over 30% of the total population and children representing less than 15% (see Traphagan and Knight 2003, also Jussuame 1991).

A simple fact of life in rural Japan is that population is declining (see Traphagan and Knight 2003). In areas such as the Tōhoku region (see Figure 1), where research for this chapter was conducted, rural prefectures such as Akita and Iwate are losing population or, at best, remaining stable, while prefectures with urban centers like Sendai
in Miyagi Prefecture have experienced population growth as young people have been drained from the countryside (Traphagan 2000). As the elderly of these areas die off, the local population, like the population of Japan in general over the next 100 years, will decline precipitously. This process has already created a stress on institutions such as schools—for example, in one mountain area in the town of Tōno in Iwate Prefecture, an elementary school and middle school have been combined in the same building due to a lack of children and in the nearby town of Kanegasaki, one elementary school that was designed to hold 200 students holds 54 as of 2006 (see chapter 28).

One area that is often overlooked when considering the situation of the living in depopulating areas is that of the dead in those same areas. As I will discuss below, Japanese ritual practice surrounding the dead involves regular visits to the gravesite to clean the grave area and also to conduct rituals for the deceased. Along with depopulation, several problems arise in relation to these graves: What happens to the dead when no-one is left alive to care for them? How do rural temples (and other institutions) maintain themselves and care for the dead when faced with declining numbers of families in their associated parishes? In this chapter, I will discuss these issues as they have been playing out