Volume 2 | Issue 6 | Article ID 1842 | Jun 25, 2004

Re-thinking Rural Japan

Nishida Yoshiaki, Ann Waswo

Re-thinking Rural Japan

by Nishida Yoshiaki and Ann Waswo

The 1990s and early 2000s have been difficult years for many farmers in many parts of the developed world. Their incomes have fallen sharply, and may well fall further as the subsidies designed to boost food production in the aftermath of the Second World War are progressively withdrawn and agriculture is increasingly exposed to unfettered market forces in the national, regional and global arena. Their intensive, industrialized production methods, celebrated in the recent past, are now the targets of criticism on both environmental and food-safety grounds. Theirs is a steadily aging population, as their children vote with their feet and move to urban areas to take up 'jobs with a future.' Young men who do opt for farming find it increasingly difficult to find young women willing to marry them, even in some parts of the United States (New York Times 6 May 1999; see also Country Living August 1999 for a response to the bride shortage in rural England). There has been severe population decline in some rural areas, and an influx of former city dwellers in search of the rural idyll in others, who then object to the noises and odors of the farming that still takes place nearby. Protesting farmers have become a familiar sight on the nightly television news. Less visible, but certainly no less significant, is the rising suicide rate among farmers in at least some countries. A debate about the future of farming and of food – in some instances, about the rural landscape itself – appears to have begun among politicians and policymakers, farmers and farmers' organizations, and consumers and consumer lobbying groups in virtually every OECD country. What the outcome of those debates will be remains to be seen, but it is likely that another great era of change for farmers and farming, comparable to the sea changes of the early postwar era, is in the offing.

In all probability, the future of farmers and farming in Japan will strike many people as an eminently clear-cut case, lacking any of the ambiguities and anxieties that bedevil consideration of the fate of farmers and farming elsewhere. After all, to most observers of agriculture and agricultural policies in the contemporary, overwhelmingly western portion of the OECD, farming in Japan is inefficiency incarnate, sustained only by a very slowly crumbling wall of protectionism, and hence a prime candidate for extinction in favor of more cheaply produced food imported from abroad. That urban residents in Japan might benefit from better housing if given access to building sites on former farmland is seen as an additional benefit, and not only by Australia and other members of the so-called Cairns group of agricultural free traders. There is also a small but increasingly vocal constituency within Japan for the elimination of most if not all of Japanese agriculture, consisting primarily of macro-economists at present but possibly poised to enjoy somewhat broader support among business interests and at least some members of the Japanese public.

Moreover, to most western scholars of modern Japan – other than to a relative handful among them who study its rural society and economy – the countryside and its purported ethos are seen as overwhelmingly negative factors in Japan's development past and present. Granted, the agricultural sector fed the nation for a crucial interval in the aftermath of the

Meiji Restoration of 1868 and made other contributions to the consolidation of the new Meiji regime and the launching of efforts to promote industrialization, by providing the major share of tax revenues, significant foreign exchange earnings from the export of raw silk and tea, and ample factory labor. But farmers themselves are widely characterized as a major source of problems for the modernizing 'rest' of the country, especially after the turn of the twentieth century. Their traditional ethos of communal solidarity has been portrayed as the linchpin of emperor-centered nationalism in the early 1900s, impeding the spread of individualism and other values deemed essential to a liberal political order. Overwhelming rural support is said to have enabled Japan's 'fascist' or 'militarist' transformation in the 1930s and the reckless attempt to establish Japanese hegemony in Asia during the Second World War. Farmers' interests as petty property owners in the aftermath of the Occupation-led land reform, combined with their 'innate conservatism' and the over-representation of rural districts in elections, is frequently cited as an obstacle to the development of a vigorous and healthy democracy in postwar Japan. Given these perceived problems, releasing Japan from the dead weight of its rural heritage might very easily be construed as offering socio-political, as well as economic, benefits.

A common feature of most western assessments of farming and farmers in Japan is sweeping generalization. The agricultural sector, the rural village, the Japanese farmer feature in the discourse, such as it is. We intend to muddy these suspiciously simple conceptual waters by providing evidence of the considerable diversity within rural Japan at any given time, as well as evidence of fairly constant processes of adaptation and change at the local level, and not only in response to directives from government officials or other elites. In contrast to the modernist paradigm, which posits a sharp dichotomy between the 'old'/rural/agrarian and the 'new'/urban/industrial and which generally portrays the old as a drag on development, we seek to demonstrate that Japanese farmers played an active and largely positive role in Japan's modern trajectory. Far from being 'innately' conservative, they have proven themselves consistently innovative, and their support for the conservative Liberal-Democratic Party (LDP) in the postwar era was by no means a foregone conclusion. The Japan Socialist Party (JSP) had been very active in the countryside in the first few years after Japan's surrender in 1945, after all, and might well have made further headway among rural voters had its significant leftwing not decided after poor results in the election of 1949 that it should concentrate on being the party of the industrial proletariat, rather than a more broadly based party of the lower and lower middle classes as a whole. Conservative politicians then proved willing and able to fill the void the JSP's retreat from the countryside created.

We focus on the twentieth century in part because a reasonably accurate portrayal of rural Japan in the late nineteenth century has found its way into textbooks of Japanese history and other western scholarship dealing at least in part with agriculture's role in Japan's development at that time. A further, and more salient, reason is that it was from the turn of the twentieth century that Japan's industrial transformation began in earnest, posing for Japan as for other countries at other times the challenge of defining a place for farming and farmers within a dramatically changing economic and social order. It is in this respect that Japan's experience may prove most relevant in comparative perspective, thus contributing to a better understanding of an important phase in the long history of agriculture itself.

Many of the issues we deal with will come as no surprise to observers of farming and farmers in the twentieth-century West. That said, however, there are certain distinctive features of the Japanese case that need to be borne in

mind. Chief among these are:

1) The relatively high proportion of farm households within the total population and total labor force of Japan, at least until fairly recently. Between 1868 and 1940, the number of farm households remained relatively stable at some 5.5 million, each with an average of about 5 household members, within a population that grew from some 35 million to 72 million persons. By and large, the non-agricultural economy in this period only provided new employment opportunities for the surplus (non-inheriting) younger sons and daughters of farm households, and no net decrease in the number of households engaged in farming occurred. That would not begin to take place until the early 1960s and the onset of Japan's so-called 'economic miracle' of sustained high rates of growth and structural change, and it would gather speed both as the non-agricultural economy soared in the years ahead and as the early postwar generation of farmers/heads of farming households progressively aged. There had been some 5.7 million farm households in 1965. By 1985 the number had fallen to 4.4 million, and it would fall to 2.9 million by 2000. During those same years the Japanese population had grown from 98 to almost 127 million, and the total labor force had increased from 48 to over 67 million. Roughly 70 per cent of the total labor force at the turn of the century, and still 45 per cent in 1950, farmers would constitute only about 10 per cent in 1980 and about 4.3 per cent in 2000.

2) The persistence of family farming on relatively small holdings throughout the century. The average holding of farm households before the Second World War was about one cho (.992 hectares or 2.45 acres) in size, and it remained one cho after the postwar land reform, which virtually eliminated farm tenancy but did not – indeed could not – address the problem of land scarcity in a mountainous and densely populated country. There were, of course, significant regional and local variations in the scale of holdings which average figures obscure, but more importantly, both before and after the war there was significant potential for productivity increases even on such small holdings, and much of that potential was realized. What might well appear to be market gardening by the standards of extensive western agriculture could prove to be reasonably profitable in Japan, and certainly adequate to providing a respectable standard of living to those who either owned the land they cultivated or paid only modest rents.

3) The centrality of one crop, rice, in agricultural production. In Japan, as elsewhere in Asia, rice has long been grown in flooded paddies, and located as Japan is on the fringes of the monsoon zone, rainfall alone could not be counted on to provide the necessary water as and when needed. A considerable infrastructure of irrigation and drainage facilities was required to service those paddies. As a result, no one farmer could own or control all of the essential means of production himself, and needed the community in order to survive as a rice producer. Herein lay the basis for communal solidarity and cooperation in the rural settlements of Japan. Other crops were grown, to be sure, on drained rice paddies in the winter, where climate allowed (generally in the southwestern half of the archipelago), and on upland or dry fields (hatake) beyond the reach of existing technology for paddy rice or – more recently – on former rice paddies that have been converted to the raising of 'upland' or dry field crops. Throughout the twentieth century, however, the area devoted to rice production generally has exceeded the area planted to all other crops combined. Moreover, the varieties of rice grown were of a specific type, shorter-grain japonica rice, that would germinate at the lower temperatures prevailing in Japan than was the case with the longer-grain indica type of rice grown in monsoon Asia, and that differed in luster, texture and taste from indica rice (Francks 1983: 28; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 13). So long as domestic demand for that rice continued to increase, Japanese rice farmers prospered. When

demand started to fall in the mid-1960s, a 'rice mountain' of surplus production began to accumulate, which no other major rice-consuming country wanted in any meaningful quantity, even if that rice had been sold at a discount well below the price the Japanese government was then paying its domestic rice producers.

'Culturally deprived' and 'politically inexperienced.' That was how the authors of a Ministry of Agriculture report described Japanese farmers in 1949, and it is more than likely that their assessment was shared by most officials within that ministry, and within the Japanese bureaucracy as a whole. This would become one source of the negative evaluation of farmers in western scholarship thereafter. Another would be the wartime propaganda of the Japanese state, which had stressed the countryside as the locus of those cardinal virtues of loyalty and self-sacrifice that defined Japan's national essence, and young men of rural birth as the nation's best soldiers. Also contributing would be a few scholarly works by Japanese authors that had been translated into English and works by a handful of western authors (most of them using the secondary literature in Japanese as their sources), which emphasized the 'feudal' character of prewar village life (Smith 2001: 355) and the harsh exploitation – by landlords and/or by capitalism – of those who actually tilled the soil. Other voices spoke for rural Japan and its residents, and by and large what they said was accepted as accurate. A rather different assessment emerges when farmers are allowed to speak for themselves, and when the logic of their actions at any time is explored.

That there were serious problems in the Japanese countryside in the decades preceding Japan's defeat in the Second World War is beyond doubt, but what is striking is the extent to which farmers involved themselves individually and collectively in tackling those problems and in achieving largely positive results. Tenant farmers in Niigata may have felt humiliated by their inability to pay the interest due on loans from their landlords during the early years of the Great Depression, and they – like most Japanese, both rural and urban – certainly supported the war effort, but neither their deference to those to whom they were beholden nor their commitment to the war effort prevented them from securing title to the land they cultivated in 1943 when a government desperate to increase food supplies made it easier for them to do so or from working to make the land reform a success in their area. Indeed, one of the major themes to emerge from our research is the vital 'pre-history' of the postwar land reform. Rather than a sudden bolt from the blue, at a stroke destroying 'the economic bondage which has enslaved the Japanese farmer to centuries of feudal oppression' (General Douglas MacArthur, quoted in Dore 1959: 23), the land reform built upon longer-term trends in rural society, constituting more of a denouement than a radically new departure. Landlord power had been eroding in many parts of Japan since the early 1910s, a consequence both of the steady commercialization of farming and of the increasing opportunities available to the actual cultivators of the land, especially the younger and literate among them, to participate in local organizations and to work as the direct agents of agricultural improvement.

In the development theory that has prevailed since the 1970s (see, for example, Schultz 1988), a strong correlation has been noted between each year of basic schooling that farmers in low income countries have completed and the productivity increases they have achieved. A similar correlation can be detected in Japan in the early decades of the twentieth century, where the number of years of compulsory elementary education increased from four to six after the Russo—Japanese war and where the output of the major crop, rice, rose by 14 per cent over its level in 1910—12 by the early 1920s. Nor was that the only consequence of basic education in rural Japan. Writing detailed diaries over decades as one tenant farmer in Niigata did may have been an

exceptional result, but studying farming techniques and keeping accounts of farming operations was not. Those widely diffused abilities were of crucial importance in efforts to achieve rural revitalization during the depression years. Even earlier, basic literacy among local farmers had been utilized to create a viable tenant farmer movement in Izumo and to confront local landlords with scientific evidence about the quality and yields of land which they could not easily ignore. The leader of that union may have been unusual in his political (and legal) savvy, and the farmers in a village to the west of Tokyo may have been unusual in including the staging of a play in their revitalization efforts in 1936 (not exactly what one would expect from the 'culturally deprived'), but farmers everywhere in Japan, including a significant proportion of tenant farmers, were increasingly taking charge of their own lives. They were reading newspapers and magazines such as Ie no hikari [Light of the Home], and discussing the issues of the day among themselves. All tenant farmers benefited from the rent controls and the two-tier pricing structure for rice that the state had been constrained to implement to assure food supplies during wartime. And their benefit constituted loss – of both income and influence – for landlords. The latter had very little left to lose in 1945, although it is certainly true that their dispossession was more thorough and uncompromising than would have been the case had Japan not been subject to the directives of an occupying power.

A second theme is the nationalism of Japanese farmers in the prewar era. To date, only the most extreme, violent and overtly militaristic forms which that nationalism took have featured in the western literature on Japan: agrarianist ideologues like Kato Kanji and their committed followers, some of whom participated in the assassinations of members of the political and economic establishment in the interwar era, as well as army and navy officers, figure prominently, and there has been a tendency to assume that what they defined as the solution to the 'plight of the countryside' and the needs of Japan in the depression era were widely embraced by poor farmers. That was far from the case, however, and considerable prodding was required in the 1930s to produce a relatively modest number of emigrants to Manchuria. That said, it cannot be denied that most rural Japanese became increasingly aware of themselves as loyal subjects of the emperor in the early 1900s – like youngsters in the contemporary West, they had been taught patriotism as well as the 'three R's' in school – and it is also likely that many rural boys became increasingly keen to 'accomplish brave deeds' as soldiers. Rural residents almost certainly participated more consistently than did their urban counterparts in the observances of Emperor Jimmu's accession, Army Day, Navy Day, and Japan's victories over China in 1895 and Russia in 1905, in no small measure because there were far fewer other events and entertainments available in the countryside to provide respite from work. As noted previously, they supported Japan's cause during the Second World War, contributing their labor to boost food supplies, the metal objects they possessed to produce bullets, and their sons. All this complicity in what proved to be a reckless spiral of aggression and conquest carried out in the emperor's name does not sit comfortably with the image of a basically gentle people 'misled by a handful of militarists' that was embraced by the Japanese public soon after Japan's surrender in 1945, and that tension attests to the still unresolved issues of broader war responsibility with which members of that public have only begun to grapple seriously since the death of the wartime Showa emperor in 1989. But there had been more to the loyalty of farmers to that emperor than just supporting Japan's ultimately disastrous and destructive actions abroad. Farmers had also used the rhetoric of loyalty to encourage agricultural improvements and the rhetoric of 'boundless imperial grace' to legitimate protest against the inequities of the status quo. These quests for

better lives and livelihoods, and for justness and fairness in the treatment of all imperial subjects, especially the most disadvantaged among them, should also be taken into account in any final reckoning of the consequences of popular nationalism, in this instance popular nationalism in the countryside, on Japan's development.

A third theme emerges from consideration of postwar Japan: the effects of rapid economic growth during the 'miracle' years on farmers and farming. There had been part-time farming in the prewar era, but back then the non-agricultural work which members of farm households did had generally served to supplement household income and to permit the maintenance or expansion of the household's farming operations. In the postwar era, part-time farming rapidly increased and off-farm work eventually came to provide the lion's share of income in the majority of farm households. Farming itself increasingly became a sideline for those households, a reversal of the relationship between farming and non-agricultural work before the war. Not only for them, but also for the minority of households who remained full-time farmers, the countryside became a more complicated place, and its formerly clear-cut function as the site for agricultural production became blurred by other considerations.

Moreover, the attitudes of farmers toward their land would change as the regional development spurred on by rapid economic growth caused land price inflation to one degree or another throughout the country. There had been great enthusiasm for farming in the 1950s and early 1960s, and for making the land more fruitful by all available means. State assistance for land adjustment and other improvements was available on a scale that the many farmers who had committed themselves to rural revitalization back in the depression era could scarcely have imagined. But over succeeding years, the fields that had formerly been seen as of crucial importance to agricultural production steadily came to be seen as an asset, whose value might well increase further if the right decisions about both farming and development prospects were made. That there were relatively few secure job opportunities for middle-aged farmers in a non-agricultural employment market that favored young school leavers and that little in the way of state social security provision was then available served to intensify the asset consciousness of the owners of farmland. As a result, the scope for farming and for giving priority to the needs of farming at the local level diminished further.

A fourth theme is the status of rural women. While they have played a vital role in family farming and in farm families throughout the twentieth century, their contributions have remained largely invisible to others, and in the recent international survey carried out by the Ie no hikari kyokai, the self-evaluations provided by a sampling of them were strikingly low. The root of the problem would appear to be significant vestiges of patriarchy, despite the abolition of the patriarchal family system and the granting of equal rights to males and females in Japan's postwar constitution and civil code. Both in the inheritance of the family's land and in decision-making about the management of its farming operations, males continue to enjoy privileged status. Indeed, even on such matters as the management of the home and the upbringing of children rural women do not seem to feel they enjoy much influence. Inheritance of the farm by one successor may make economic sense, especially when small holdings of land are involved, but the exclusion of daughters from consideration for that inheritance does not. Nor have the messages delivered by inheritance practices and assumptions about who should make key decisions been lost on rural daughters. Increasingly throughout the postwar era, they have sought to escape from constant and unrewarded toil by leaving the countryside, or at the very least by marrying someone other than a farmer. The 'bride shortages' that have attracted attention recently in the West have already become 'bride famines' in some parts

of rural Japan. Put another way, the 'pure and simple' farming life that appeals to those relatively few urban women who have participated with their families in rural resettlement very definitely does not appeal to many among those born and raised female in the Japanese countryside.

Which brings us to the present – and future – of rural Japan. According to one scenario, only the most marginal of farmers throughout the country and the most marginal of farming communities, whether in the mountainous hinterland or in isolated pockets within densely populated urban districts, will disappear from now on. Elsewhere, farming will thrive, on ever larger holdings (whether owned by their cultivators or jointly operated in some way, or owned and/or managed by corporations) and with ever greater economies of scale achieved. In a much more radical scenario, virtually all domestic farming will cease, except for a small number of specialist operations catering to especially lucrative niche markets, and Japan will rely on the international marketplace to supply the overwhelming bulk of its food needs.

The latter reliance has already grown pronounced, it should be noted. According to a recent white paper (Norin tokei kyokai 2000), Japan had enjoyed a rather high 79 per cent ratio of self-sufficiency in food (on a calorie basis) in 1960, but that ratio tumbled during the high-growth years that followed, and amounted to only 40 per cent in 1999. This is markedly below the self-sufficiency ratio of 60 per cent in Switzerland, said to be the lowest in Europe. Moreover, Japan's experience in this regard is almost exactly the opposite of Britain's, where the ratio was at the low level of 40 per cent in 1970 but then rose to about 80 per cent in 1999. Not surprisingly, food security re-surfaced as a major concern of the Japanese government in the late 1990s, and that concern contributed to passage of the New Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas in 1999, one aim of which was to boost Japan's self-sufficiency ratio. There is no intention to seek any dramatic increase in that ratio – as of March 2000, the goal of achieving just 45 per cent self-sufficiency within 10 years had been announced – but there are a host of questions being debated in policy-making circles and in the media relating to the implications of relying substantially on imported food, not only for Japanese consumers and the farmers elsewhere who supply that food, but also for the environment. Precisely how can reasonable standards for the safety of food be maintained in a globalized agricultural system, and the very supply of adequate food stocks be assured in the event of natural or man-made disasters elsewhere? Would the farmers of sub-Saharan African states and other less developed countries in Asia and Latin America, whom some economists see as the logical suppliers of food to the developed world (for example, Blank 1998), be forever consigned to 'low-wage dependent' agriculture, and their countries denied the development trajectories that the once predominantly agrarian countries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have enjoyed? While food produced hundreds and even thousands of miles from Japan may well be less expensive than domestically produced food at present, even after transport costs have been factored in, what is all the fossil fuel needed to get that food to Japan by sea and by air doing to the ecosystems essential to life on earth? And, getting back to Japanese consumers, what bearing do all those additional 'food miles' have on the quality of food available to them?

The decline in Japan's food self-sufficiency ratio after 1960 reflected the very weakening of the bases for domestic agricultural production to which we have already referred. There had been slightly more than 6 million hectares of farmland in the country in 1960, but that area had fallen by 20 per cent to only 4.8 million hectares in 2000. And in the latter year, farmers over the age of 65 accounted for fully 52.9 per cent of all those engaged in agriculture. Within the next ten years, those farmers will have retired, and unless others fill their places, the area of land in cultivation may

well decrease even further. Farming hamlets themselves were disappearing at the rate of 500 per year between 1990 and 2000, and that rate, too, is likely to quicken, if fields are left abandoned after the death of their owners and the population of the community falls below a critical point.

To be sure, there are some prospects for replacing the increasingly elderly Japanese farmers of the present. A fairly small number of urban young people have responded to advertising campaigns to take up 'a farming adventure' by migrating directly from the city to the countryside, and there are probably greater numbers of rural resettlers as well, among them recent retirees from urban employment who have gone back to their native village or to some other village in the region of their birth to resume the farming they experienced as youths. The long recession in Japan since the early 1990s and the marked increase in unemployment in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy it has generated may well contribute to these trends. But it is highly unlikely that such settlement/resettlement alone will suffice to reinvigorate Japan's agricultural sector. To achieve that, considerably greater attention will have to be paid to creating the conditions locally, regionally and nationally in which farmers sense, as did their predecessors in the decades before the war and in the early postwar era, that opportunities exist for them to improve their farming operations. Moreover, considerable attention must also be paid to broadening the still narrow definition of 'public interest' that has survived in most rural communities to include the Japanese public as a whole, on the one hand, and to providing rural women with at least the same degree of equality in family life and the management of familial assets that urban women have gained, on the other.

Almost exactly thirty years ago, in the summer of 1973, the American biologist Paul Erlich described Japan as the 'canary' in the contemporary industrialized world's mineshaft, because it was then 'the most precariously overdeveloped nation' of all, whose collapse would serve as an early warning to other nations at work on the same natural resource-intensive and polluting coalface (Mainichi Evening News 8 June 1973). Japan managed that challenge, although not without difficulty or delay, by the imposition of a modicum of pollution controls and by a progressive shift to cleaner, knowledge-intensive industries. Now there is a new canary on duty, in the mineshaft of the industrial/post-industrial world's most precariously marginalized agricultural sector. Whether it can – or to what extent, it should – be revitalized is now at issue.

References

Blank, Steven C. 1998. The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio. Westport, Connecticut: Quorum Books.

Country Living. August 1999. 'Lonely Hearts Campaign: The Farmer Wants a Wife,' pp. 54—6.

Dore, Ronald P. 1959. Land Reform In Japan. London: Oxford University Press.

Francks, Penelope. 1983. Technology and Agricultural Development in Pre-War Japan. New Haven: Yale University Press

New York Times. 6 May 1999. 'Scrambling to Find Cupid in a Haystack.'

Norin tokei kyokai. 2000. Zusetsu shokuryo . nogyo . noson hakusho.

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. 1993. Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Schultz, T. Paul. 1988. 'Education Investments and Returns.' In Handbook of Development Economics, vol. 1, ed. Hollis Chenery and T.N. Srinivasan. Amsterdam, London, New York and Tokyo: North-Holland.

Smith, Kerry. 2001. A Time of Crisis: Japan, the Great Depression, and Rural Revitalization. Cambridge: Harvard University

Asia Center.This is a composite version of the introduction and conclusion to our co-edited book,
Farmers and Village Life in Twentieth-Century Japan, published by RoutledgeCurzon
in 2003.

Nishida Yoshiaki, formerly of the Institute of Social Sciences, Tokyo University, presently of Kanazawa University, is the author of numerous works on Japanese agriculture. He is now editing the Japanese translation of Farmers and Village Life in Twentieth-Century Japan.

Ann Waswo is University Lecturer in Modern Japanese History, Oxford University, and Director of the Nissan Institute of Japanese Studies. She recently published Housing in Postwar Japan: A Social History.

Posted at Japan Focus on June 1, 2004.