

Notes from the Field

Radical Actions by Radical Farmers

Regional Revitalization in the Okitama Basin of Yamagata Prefecture

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ABSTRACT: This report describes the ways in which a group of organic farmers in Yamagata Prefecture have been able to effect basic structural changes that contribute to the social transformative process of counter-hegemony. Members of the Okitama Farmers' League (OFL) have initiated a regional revitalization plan that is based on the concept of eco-circularity in which local household food wastes and other organic materials are converted into compost for use by area organic farmers. By forming organic farmers' collectives, members provide farm-related work in rural areas during the long winter months. The women farmers in the group formed a support group for farm wives to fight collectively against female subordination within the household as well as to improve the overall position of women in the Okitama area. They are challenging the dominant culture's values and social assumptions, and are engaged in creating new cultural values and definitions of self in relation to others. The OFL offers a vision of a noneconomistic, democratized, and environmentally sustainable society centered on universal principles of human rights, social justice, and popular participation in the reformulation of the meanings attached to work, authority, culture, family, community, gender, and consumption.

At each of four regional organic farmers' groups I visited in Japan while engaged in my dissertation fieldwork research, I found at least two or three member farmers who had experienced living in the megalopolises of either Osaka or Tokyo for an extended period of time (between four and ten years). Some of these farmers left home to attend colleges and universities, returning to the family

farm upon graduation; others had pursued careers in the city after finishing their schooling.

Referred to as the “U-turn phenomenon” in Japan, increasing numbers of the sons and daughters of farm families are returning to their natal towns and villages from often prolonged stays in major metropolises, and a large number of those who return and take over family farms are doing so on the condition that they will be able to farm organically. They bring back with them not only invigorating new ideas and new forms of behavior, but also eye-opening stories of the alienating lifestyles and hardships associated with city life that make life in the countryside appear greatly preferable in contrast.

The returnees often breathe new life into regional towns and villages, and their enthusiastic determination to succeed as full-time organic farmers, helping to form various organic farmers’ collectives and working with other rural residents to revitalize the countryside, often acts as a catalyst, motivating others to work together to improve their lives.

The presence of the returnees accelerates the process of transcending the rural-urban dichotomy, as they maintain their ties (material and ideological) with both areas. Because of their familiarity with the hectic and congested urban lifestyle, their friendships with urban residents, their knowledge of broader social issues and their experience with some of the movements associated with them, and their ultimate decision to choose the rural over the urban, they have been able to make significant contributions to the growth of the organic farming movement in the relatively remote regional areas of Japan.

In this report, I focus on a group of organic farmers in Okitama County (Yamagata Prefecture) who are involved in revitalizing their entire regional economy.¹ Okitama County, with its three cities, five towns, and numerous villages, lies in a fertile basin surrounded by the Northern Japan Alps. Situated in the middle of Japan’s snow belt, the county has an agricultural season that lasts only six months, and 95 percent of the county’s farm families obtain most of their income from a combination of local factory employment at subcontracting firms and migratory labor during the six months of winter.

The harsh climate and depressed economy, coupled with the government’s agricultural policy of rice acreage reduction, has led to sporadic cases of farmers in northern Japan committing suicide; ever-increasing cases of “importing” farm brides from the Philippines and other Asian countries because of the shortage of Japanese women willing to marry into a farm family; and a general attitude of resignation to the seemingly inevitable prospect of community degeneration and regional socioeconomic decay. It was in the midst of such pessimism and despair that angry young farmers in Okitama County formed a study group in 1977 to evaluate their options and take concrete measures to counteract the negative effects of government and corporate actions on the area residents’ livelihoods.

This group of farmers, who called themselves the Okitama Farmers’ League (Okitama Hyakusho Kouryukai), grew to include thirty farm families by 1993. Not content with their individual achievements as full-time, year-round organic farmers, the farmers are energetically involved in creating an organic and

low-input agricultural *community* that will eventually include 1,600 farm families and 3,000 hectares of farmland. Several of the men in the Okitama Farmers' League (OFL), and about half of the women, have spent extended periods of time in the Tokyo or Osaka areas; many of them were radicalized there by associations with either the Japan Communist Party (JCP) or the non-JCP Left, including a variety of New Left groups. Politicized and motivated, these men and women brought new ideas and new values with them to the Okitama Basin; collectively they initiated numerous actions that have positively affected many of the local residents. Their efforts to revitalize not just one village or town but a whole region, and their commitment to improving the position of women in rural Japan are described below. While clearly the most explicitly New Left-influenced of the organic farmers' groups that I visited in the course of my research, the OFL has a vision of the future that is shared by many in Japan's organic farming movement.

From Social Opposition to Creation of a Shared Social Vision

A look at the experiences that have shaped the life of Kanno Yoshihide, the initiator of the Okitama Farmers' League, will help us understand the course of the OFL's development since the early 1990s. Like others I met in every organic farmers' group I have visited in Japan, Kanno was radicalized and politically awakened by his experiences in the wider world outside of Yamagata Prefecture. Exposed to radical critiques of capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism, Kanno and other radicalized returnees brought new interpretations of social reality back with them to their natal towns and villages, and no matter how remote the village or how entrenched conservative rule had been, the new ideas and values invariably energized at least some local residents to take action and initiate changes.

Kanno Yoshihide related to me how he desperately wanted to escape the rural countryside and everything associated with farming when he was growing up. To accomplish this, he applied himself to his studies, and passed the entrance examinations to some of the top universities in Japan, entering the law department at Meiji University in Tokyo in 1969.

During his first two years at university, he found his classes uninspiring and he realized that he lacked any direction in his studies. One day, near the end of his sophomore year, he read a newspaper article about two farmers in Aomori Prefecture (north of Yamagata) who had committed suicide due to the government policy of rice acreage reduction (*gentan*), which, they stated in their suicide notes, had made them feel that they would be better off dead.

Reading this article shocked Kanno into deciding to become an agricultural scientist in order to help improve the plight of Japanese farmers. He changed his major to agricultural economics, but soon found the focus of these studies to be too theoretical and of no practical use in addressing the concrete problems confronting Japan's farmers.

He then read about the Sanrizuka farmers' movement's struggle to oppose the confiscation of farmland by the Japanese government in order to build a new Tokyo international airport in Chiba Prefecture. His decision to join the

Sanrizuka struggle, he says now, opened his eyes to the extent of social injustice in Japanese society:

I was a Zenkyoto [All-Campus Joint Student Struggle Committee] member only because all university students became members automatically upon registration. I'd never had an interest in politics before, and I went to Sanrizuka as an unaffiliated individual with a farming background.

Spending time out there supporting the farmers' right to keep their land, I had the chance to talk with people involved in many different movements, from those opposing the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the U.S. war in Vietnam to those fighting for the basic human rights of Burakumin [an outcaste group] or Zai Nichi Chosenjin [residents of Korean descent] in Japan. I was finding out things about Japanese society that they didn't teach at university.

I thought before that Marxist meant radical and revolutionary, because I know my parents were really upset when I told them that some of my professors were Marxists. Well, going to Sanrizuka made me realize that if Marxist professors limit themselves to theoretical concerns and don't deal with practical matters, they're no different than any other conservative. I learned more about economics and sociology by being with the farmers and other activists out there than I learned in two years at university.

Not wanting to disappoint his parents, who were looking forward to his graduation from university, Kanno tried to maintain a clean police record so that he would be able to graduate. In September 1971, however, he was arrested along with a large number of other airport opposition activists and was held without charges in a police detention cell for three months. He was eventually charged with a misdemeanor — a charge that was not serious enough to prevent his later graduation — and sentenced to three months' probation.

After graduation, Kanno decided to go to Okinawa to help support members of a farming and fishing community in their struggle against the construction of a large-scale oil refinery near their village. During his six-month stay with the Okinawan farmers, he learned that the U.S. military had expropriated about 25 percent of Okinawa's best farmland and coastal waters for its bases and recreational facilities, and that Tokyo-based developers were in the process of driving up land prices, dividing communities, and destroying the environment in their rush to construct island resort complexes.

Talking with farmers there enabled Kanno to make the connection between what was happening to the farmers in Sanrizuka, in Okinawa, and in Yamagata Prefecture, where his family's farm was located. He began to see that the health of future generations and the health of the environment were tied to the viability of sustainable farming and that if farmers did not work together to find workable alternatives to state agricultural policies, which primarily benefited the industrial sector, family farming would become a relic of the past, discarded as an impediment to economic rationalization and the pursuit of profit. When asked by one of the farmers why he did not return to fight against the destruction of farming communities in his own village, he realized that that was where he could best put his knowledge and experience to use, as a farmer-activist.

Kanno returned to his hometown of Nagai in Okitama County in 1977, at the age of 26, determined to unite other area farmers in the fight to revitalize an economically depressed rice-growing region. He established the Okitama Farmers' League with other young farmers who opposed the government's acreage reduction program and who were interested in creating an alliance between farmers and urban residents based on direct marketing and decentralized structures. Kanno explained that with the imposition of the government's set-aside policy, farmers had to take 25 percent of their paddyland out of rice production, and that if a farmer refused, the government through Nokyo (Association of Agricultural Cooperatives) would refuse to buy 25 percent of the harvested rice the first year, 50 percent the second year, and 75 percent the third year. If the farmer still refused to participate in the set-aside policy, Nokyo would then refuse to buy any of the farmer's rice harvest.

In 1978, OFL members produced and distributed more than one thousand copies of a 20-page critique of the set-aside policy that called on all concerned citizens to support the growing farmers' opposition to a policy that forced farmers, under threat of severe penalties, to leave rice paddies fallow or convert them to upland crop production. The report urged farmers to unite with consumers and form direct-marketing relations that would bypass Nokyo and government controls.

Farmers' and urban residents' organizations in the Okitama Basin area requested copies of the report, and the OFL's opposition to the set-aside policy won support from hundreds of area residents and most farm households in the Basin. In order to defuse a potentially explosive protest movement, the mayor of the city of Nagai offered an additional 3,000 yen for each ten *are* (one hundred square meters) of paddyland a farm household agreed to leave fallow.

This generous offer was too difficult to resist, with most farm families in the area saddled with debts and trying to make ends meet; Kanno was the only farmer who refused to capitulate. He told me that neighbors, friends, and relatives stopped coming to his house for visits; his father suffered a nervous breakdown; and he himself was hospitalized due to health problems associated with high blood pressure. After his discharge from the hospital, Kanno acquiesced (although he still refused to accept what he refers to as "bribe money") and built large enclosures for chickens on the rice field directly in front of his house.

Kanno then directed his attention to developing a sustainable farm management system that incorporated organic techniques; creating direct-marketing relations with local consumers; working with the local Seikyo Co-op to have them accept organic and low-input produce from area farmers; encouraging other farmers to convert to organic or low-input farming methods; establishing ties with other organic farmers' groups and with social movements related to the organic farming movement; and working with the city government to implement a recycling program that would benefit the area's agricultural economy. This recycling program, based on the concept of eco-circularity, came to be known as the Rainbow Plan.

Kanno and the other farmers and supporters of the OFL convinced the city government that by providing organic compost at a nominal cost to area

farmers, the Nagai area of Okitama could become an organic farming showcase with the potential for more than three thousand hectares of farmland to be converted to organic production. This would contribute greatly to the local economy, and help revitalize all of the five villages and numerous hamlets within the city of Nagai's jurisdiction. One Nagai City Hall public servant told me that city officials hope that Nagai City's efforts will have a demonstration effect, encouraging other rural cities to support the growth of organic farming in this way.

Rainbow Plan

In 1995, the Rainbow Plan recycling program was launched to convert household food wastes (*namagomi*) and other organic wastes (e.g., wood chips, crop residues, and livestock manure) into compost for use by area farmers. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) provided 50 percent of the start-up capital for the processing plant and the prefectural government contributed 9 percent. After surveys indicated that an overwhelming majority of area residents supported the plan, the city of Nagai offered to provide most of the rest of the funds.

In the summer of 2001, Sagae Shinichi, a Nagai City Hall official, explained to me how the Rainbow Plan had evolved to such an extent that Nokyo was now planning to build another compost center to meet the huge demand by area farmers for organic compost. He said that Nagai City, working with the area farmers' committee (Nogyo Iin Kai), was working out plans to attract young people from far and near to take up organic farming in the Okitama Basin.

All nine thousand households within the Nagai City jurisdiction are participating in the Rainbow Plan, and their organic kitchen wastes are picked up by the city twice a week. In 2000, the compost center produced 600 tons of organic compost made from 1,351 tons of kitchen scraps, 434 tons of livestock dung, and 450 tons of rice husks and chaff. More than two hundred local farm families have converted to organic or low-input farming methods, applying the organic compost that they purchase for the nominal cost of 4,000 yen (\$40) per ton. By 2001, ten cities in the prefectures of Tochigi, Akita, Saitama, Chiba, and Tokyo had adopted the Rainbow Plan. The farm families who participate in the Rainbow Plan sell their products at the weekly Sunday market. Local stores sell processed and packaged foods made by the Rainbow Producers' Group (Niji no Kai), e.g., tofu, miso, natto, pumpkin cookies, and "Rainbow Ramen" (a noodle soup), and the city buys fresh produce from the farmers for public school cafeterias.

Nagai City government is totally committed to supporting the Rainbow Plan and its vision of regional revitalization centered on sustainable farming practices. The city has produced information packets and it offers farmers free advice on how to convert to organic production. The city government coordinates a network of organic farmers and organic farmers' groups for mutual consultation and support and organizes seminars by organic farmers, sustainable agriculture specialists, and university professors in an effort to strengthen the movement. Government officials also offer to inspect converted fields (two or three months after planting and then again just before harvest) and they give

successful farmers an official seal of approval to attach on agricultural products harvested from those fields, certifying the use of organic or low-input farming methods.

The Rainbow Plan is breaking down the urban-rural dichotomy by encouraging local urban consumers to recognize how they can participate in the food-production process by becoming involved in the eco-circulation system that returns food wastes back to the soil. This increases the awareness of farmers and urbanites alike of their co-dependence. The farmers of Nagai feel better knowing that local people are enjoying the fruits of their labor and urban residents of Nagai value the role they play in providing access to locally grown foods that are not only fresh but also safe to eat.

Organic Farmers' Collective

Long before the Rainbow Plan came into being, OFL members had established a farmers' collective that provided local residents with pickled vegetables and other food products made from locally grown organic food crops. Thus, many local urban residents were already familiar with the mutual advantage of locally grown and locally consumed food, and see the Rainbow Plan as the logical next step in broadening involvement.

The Agricultural Products-Processing Research Association (Nosan Kako Kenkyukai, or Nokaken), a collective made up of some OFL members who live in the town of Shirataka, makes a variety of pickled vegetables, umeboshi (pickled plums), mochi (sticky rice cakes from glutinous rice), and miso (soybean paste). Formed in 1985, with a membership of seven men, the collective now allows seven farm families to be able to stay together as families throughout the year, provides employment to people in the area, and processes agricultural products for other area farmers. In 2001, seven women and the husbands of three of the women were running the collective.

The large wooden barrels used to naturally age the soybeans used to make miso were obtained free from local farmers who no longer have a use for them. Farm families once produced their own miso for home consumption, but few do so now. The farmers who donated their barrels to the collective were happy that the unused barrels were being put to good use. In return, they received miso as a thank you gift from the farm families. The packaging machine used to vacuum-pack the pickled vegetables was obtained from the local agricultural high school. The high school donated the 35-year-old machine to the collective because there were no students interested in pursuing careers in agriculture and learning how to produce and package pickled vegetables. (The collective has since purchased a new packaging machine of its own.)

The part-time workers in the pickled vegetable facility were paid 700 yen per hour in 2001, about 25 percent above the average hourly rate for area factory workers. In 2001, there were six part-time workers (five in their fifties and sixties and one high school student). They averaged about 150,000 yen (\$1,500) per month in wages. Talking with three of the women who were working when I visited the facility in 1993, I found that they took pride in the pickled vegetables they made since they pooled their expertise and some of their favorite home

recipes were used. One woman said that she enjoys working with other farmwomen like herself. She really likes the idea of getting paid for doing something that she always did at home for free. I had the impression that these women were delighted to find work they enjoy doing within minutes from their homes.

A woman in her mid-fifties told me that since her husband had sustained a back injury the previous winter, while working in Tokyo as a construction worker, her income from the pickled vegetable factory enabled them to survive without his having to migrate to the city. She added that with local factory layoffs and plant shutdowns, finding employment was not easy for people like her and her husband.

I was told that members of the collective found it difficult, when deciding to hire their part-time workers, to turn away applicants in similar economic difficulties to that of the woman described, because only so many jobs were available. Members hoped that with continued growth, they would be able to provide jobs to more local residents.

In late 1993, in response to a request from the Seikyo Co-op (a national-level organization based in Tokyo) for fresh, organically grown vegetables throughout the six-month growing season (in addition to the pickled vegetables it was already receiving during the six winter months), the collective's members decided to form another collective called Yuki Yasai no Kai (Organic Vegetables Group). Organic farmers in the area were invited to join the newly formed collective, which was later renamed the Raw Vegetables Group (Nama Yasai no Kai). Ten women farmers entered into a collective agreement to supply Seikyo with an agreed-upon number of varieties and amounts of organically grown vegetables.

The ten women farmers take turns making deliveries to 160 local consumer families twice a month, charging 2,500 yen (\$25) per box of fresh vegetables. According to one of the farmers, Hikita Mitsuko, "Direct face-to-face exchange is always important to enable people see the human connection." In 2000 the group grossed 53 million yen (\$530,000) in sales to local consumers, mail-order customers, and the Seikyo Co-op.

Nokaken, the farmers' collective described above, was established by Sugawara Shoichi, an organic farmer who took up farming immediately upon graduation from high school in 1973 and never left his natal village. The contrast between his experiences and those of Kanno Yoshihide, described above, should be readily apparent. However, the fact that they are now working closely together toward similar goals indicates that divergent paths can ultimately lead in the same direction.

Homegrown Radicalism: Fighting against the Odds

Born in 1955, Sugawara Shoichi grew up seeing with his own eyes how the post-war Japanese government's contradictory agricultural policy shifts had led to massive migrations of farm families to the major metropolises, resulting in the hollowing out of rural towns and villages such as the one he lived in (Shirataka). He also saw how these policy shifts had contributed to the economic difficulties

of the farm families who remained, forcing most men to migrate to the cities during the off-season to engage in the dirty, demanding, and dangerous work that no one else was willing to do. Various policy shifts by the government (described below) forced his own father to give up farming and take up office work; he rented out his farmland to others. Sugawara grew up knowing that although the odds would be against him, he wanted to find an alternative economic strategy for family farmers so they could succeed and regain their pride as independent farmers.

Talking with me about the contradictory shifts in the government's postwar agricultural policies, Sugawara explained that sericulture, along with rice production, had been the main source of supplementary income for farmers in the area until the mid-1950s. Immediately after the war, MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestries, and Fisheries) had encouraged area farmers to expand their sericulture production by planting more mulberry trees, which many farmers (including his father) did. In the mid-1950s, however, when silk prices plummeted due to the increase in cheap imports from China, everyone in the area had to give up sericulture altogether.

According to Sugawara, MAFF then encouraged area farmers to specialize in pig production and buy more land (if possible) to grow more rice. His father closely followed this policy (the 1961 Fundamentals of Agriculture Act) and bought pigs and more land for rice production, along with the whole "modern miracle package" of agricultural machinery, improved seeds, and chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

However, the price that his father received for mature pigs did not even cover the cost of feeding them, and he and other farmers in the area who had bought pigs had to give up pig production. In addition, the debts incurred from the purchase of all the modern inputs forced his father to migrate to Tokyo during the six months of winter to supplement his farm income and pay his debts. Sugawara recalled that during the winter months, when he was growing up, only women, children, and the elderly were left in the village; no young men were anywhere to be seen.

For Sugawara's father, the final blow came with the introduction of the rice acreage reduction policy in 1970. After working so hard to follow government directives to purchase and expand his rice fields, only to be told to leave 25 percent of his rice fields fallow or face stiff penalties, he finally came to the dismaying realization that the Japanese government had abandoned the farming population and that there was no future in farming in Japan.

With such dismal prospects for anyone entering the farming profession in Japan in the 1970s, very few, if any, high school graduates were inclined to become farmers. Only thirty-three students out of Sugawara's graduating class of more than three hundred enrolled in the agricultural studies program; only two, including himself, had decided to become farmers. His father was not at all happy with his decision.

Sugawara told me that one of his teachers had been influenced by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (in Japanese translation) and that this high school teacher had enthusiastically talked about the inevitable emergence of a socially

responsible farming system in the near future. This teacher had the class conduct organic farming experiments to show how crop rotations and an integrated farm management system that was small-scale and ecologically sound could be economically viable. He added:

This was the opposite of what was being taught at the major agricultural high school in the Okitama area. There, students were taught how to manage a large-scale farm enterprise in order to be competitive internationally. They were taught that if Japanese farmers didn't learn to emulate the rich and successful American farmers, they would have no chance to succeed on the highly competitive international market.

According to Sugawara, the teachers at his high school taught organic farming techniques because they were either unwilling or unable to teach the students how to succeed by faithfully complying with the rules of the game: graduate from university and enter the corporate world or become a government worker. He found the study of organic farming very interesting and he thought that becoming an organic farmer would offer him a chance to be his own boss.

The existence of such teachers is a good example of how people can find ways to use the system (in this case, the national education system) for counter-hegemonic purposes. Teaching in a small, rural high school, their influence was overlooked, or, even if noticed, may have been passed off as inconsequential. Nevertheless, these teachers did influence some of their students to at least question the government's position on farm policy, and they influenced others, such as Sugawara, to actually take up the challenge to develop an alternative, decentralized, and small-scale integrated farming system in tune with human and environmental needs. After finishing high school, Sugawara took over the family farm and after years of painstaking effort, built it up to what it is now: an integrated farm system with 1.7 hectares of rice fields, 40 *are* of mulberry orchard, 25 *are* of mixed-fruit orchard, 10 *are* of vegetables for home consumption, and about five hundred chickens. One day, as we were mixing chicken feed together, he explained how he tapped into the knowledge passed on from the past in order to integrate old ideas with new ones:

Sericulture was an important component in the integrated farming system that was developed by farmers in this area in the not-so-distant past. Farmers had their chickens free-range in the mulberry orchards. The chickens ate insects, worms, fallen leaves, and fallen mulberries, along with the weeds, so there was no need to pull or cut the weeds in the mulberry orchards and the chickens were basically able to feed themselves. Also, their droppings fertilized the soil in the orchards so there was no need to apply fertilizer in the orchards.

Now, although there's no income from the mulberry orchard itself — although I'm thinking about bottling and selling mulberry jam — my chicken houses are in the fenced-in orchard, and as the chickens are able to free-range in the orchard, they're happy and healthy. I don't have to supplement their natural diet very much in the summertime with all the weeds and insects they have to eat. Of course, in the winter, it's a different

story since they depend entirely on me to feed them, and I have to even mix small pebbles like this in their feed to help them with their digestion.

No doubt about it, Sugawara's chickens did indeed look "happy and healthy," and although it was mid-November and the first snow had not yet fallen, his chickens were "happily" ranging about the orchard, finding a variety of edibles. When I visited him again in 2001, we went on an egg delivery round together. His chickens lay about two hundred eggs per day and he takes a half-day twice a week to deliver to one hundred locations within a few miles of his farm. We delivered to the Seikyo Co-op, a nursery school cafeteria, company cafeterias, and individual households. Sugawara is very personable and enjoys friendly relations with his customers. The eggs (ten eggs per pack at 400 yen or \$4) bring in 60,000 yen (\$600) per week on average, so Sugawara is more than happy to keep his chickens happy. He explained that laying hens live for about five years; he butchers them himself at that point and makes delicious chicken sausage, selling some to restaurants, giving some to friends and neighbors as presents, and keeping some for home consumption.

The societal value attached to monetary profit must be replaced with a value attached to equality, Sugawara insists. Everyone must be taught to feel equal with everyone else and naturally come to treat one another as equals. He feels that the market mentality and the dog-eat-dog competitive nature of capitalism have forced farmers to become selfish and lose touch with the affinity they once had with their neighbors.

He believes that the organic farming movement in Japan, with its emphasis on building relationships based on trust and mutual respect, and with its attempts to bridge the gaps between social movements in order to transform society to reflect the true needs of humanity, offers the best hope for the future of the planet. According to his philosophy of life, farmers and all people must learn to act collectively.

When I asked him to trace the major influences that helped to shape his outlook and form his values, he responded by stating:

When I first started farming at age 19, I had to migrate to Nagoya the first year [1975] and Kawasaki the second year [1976] in the five winter months, working under contract in the construction industry. Those months spent in the Tokyo and Osaka areas made me realize with dead certainty that I wasn't cut out for city living. Everything was so expensive; people cram-packed everywhere, and the feeling of being alone in a crowd....I couldn't stand the loneliness. Although I was able to make good money, about 10,000 yen in a day [then about \$30], I was so glad to return home to the farm in the spring, to be able to visit with friends and neighbors, to actually be part of a community. Of course there were the usual disagreements between neighbors, quarrels with friends and family members, but the feeling of closeness, of community, canceled out all the negatives.

Anyway, being with other migrant laborers, listening to their stories of being cheated by labor recruiters and different bosses, seeing for myself how human dignity was trampled on, how some people were made to feel

inferior to others, how college-educated office workers walked around with dazed expressions on their faces, seeming to not care about themselves, let alone anyone else, all these images started to merge into one grotesque nightmare. I knew that our society was sick, and that we had to take action ourselves to try to nurse it back to health.

It was about that time that Mr. Kanno [Yoshihide] came back from his sojourn in the city. We formed the Okitama Farmers' League in 1977 to protest the rice acreage reduction policy. I first met Mr. Kanno when he came to talk to a Young Peoples' Group [*seinen dan*] social problems study group meeting. The group was involved in studying issues related to the set-aside policy, regional decay, emperor worship ideology, Japanese imperialism, migrant labor, and patriarchy. Actually, the only reason I joined the study group was because a very attractive 21-year-old woman talked me into it. Anyway, I was very interested in what Mr. Kanno had to say about the interconnectedness of everything. He was a very impressive speaker, and it was the first time I saw the connections between family, community, nation, and the world, and the need to focus on solidarity instead of individualism.

Later, I met other farmers who were supporters of the Japan Communist Party, and I met people who were with the Pacific-Asia Resource Center [PARC] interested in rural revitalization. I eventually married Hikita Mitsuko, who was with PARC in Tokyo when we first met. She came with Douglass Lummis, also with PARC, to interview members of the Okitama Farmers' League. They were staying at Mr. Kanno's house and I was invited there for a dinner party. From the day I met her, she opened my eyes to new ways of seeing the world around me that I hadn't even noticed before she brought such things to my attention.

That Sugawara was introduced to organic agriculture and a critical evaluation of national agricultural policy as a high school student in a small, rural, agricultural high school, and that he was sensitized to injustices that he encountered as a migrant laborer and politicized by those encounters, shows that the process of politicization and ideological change is varied and unpredictable. Radicalizing influences can present themselves in unexpected quarters.

As Sugawara's account makes clear, villagers who remain in the countryside do not live in an ideological vacuum. Many of them have become politicized at least to the extent that they no longer trust the conservative political parties, are critical of government agricultural policies, and are painfully aware of social injustices. Others such as Sugawara have moved beyond criticism and opposition to actually creating new social relations based on redefined values and reformulated cultural assumptions. The merging of the boundaries between rural and urban in Japan, and the constant interaction between urban and rural, clearly shows that not only have hegemonic values and norms penetrated into the most remote and isolated corners of the nation, but counter-hegemonic ones have as well.

Sugawara's wife was formerly with the New Left-influenced Pacific-Asia Resource Center, and Kanno Yoshihide's wife was involved in the radical

Sanrizuka anti-airport struggles. Several other farm wives in the group lived for a period of time in the Tokyo area and had been politicized by their participation in various events that took place there. The women are all struggling to break down the barriers to the emancipation of women by directly attacking deeply embedded patriarchal attitudes and behavioral norms; boldly confronting the hypocrisy and double standards employed by supposedly progressive men; and creatively establishing women's support groups that reach out to women in need of the strength that comes with solidarity in order to overcome feelings of helplessness, isolated as many of them are in a surrounding sea of male dominance. Their example of fighting patriarchy where it is most deeply entrenched, in the remote rural bastions of androcentrism, may provide the incentive for others (both men and women) to follow suit.

Women's Group Breaks New Ground in Okitama

In February 1990, OFL farm wives formed the Women's Group to Break New Ground in Okitama (Okitama wo Hiraku Onna-tachi no Kai, hereafter, Okitama Women's Group). Most of these women were in their thirties and forties and were interested in establishing a women's group that would not only provide a support group for farm wives, but would directly address broader social issues, incorporating women's perspectives.

Based on conversations I had with several of the group's members, I found that some of the members, particularly those who had worked for, or had been affiliated with, PARC, had been initially interested in forming the group in order to strengthen ties with farmers in the Third World and to generate support among the local populace for the struggles of Third World farm families. The majority of the members, however, wanted to concentrate first on improving the position of women in the Okitama area, starting with the fight against female subordination within the household.

Although membership in the Okitama Women's Group is open to all area farm wives, the members are, for the most part, OFL farm wives. Meetings are held two or three times per month, with fifteen to twenty farm wives attending. One woman explained her position:

I considered myself a feminist activist when I lived in Tokyo and I took part in demonstrations, conferences, and Third World solidarity movements; and I engaged in many actions to promote social change. When I first came here after marrying [a local organic farmer], I thought that, thanks to my past activism, I would be able to have an impact on local society and help improve the situation of discrimination against women. I was shocked to discover that I had my hands full just trying to cope with the feudal relations within the household I married into. It was then that I realized that we have to work to overcome patriarchy in the home before we can attempt to fight against it in the society at large.

This women's group allows all of us [farm wives] to release pent-up emotions and frustrations, and support each other in our individual struggles at home. We have to at least partially conform to the behavior expected of us as *yome* [daughters-in-law]; otherwise our marriages would fall apart.

It's kind of like compromising our principles, and that's what makes it so difficult to bear. Knowing that other women are in similar situations makes it easier to endure, and discussing our problems, especially how to get along with and at the same time enlighten our parents-in-law, really helps. Comparing strategies and sharing stories really help to relieve the stress.

With the structure of support in place, these farm wives are able to meet on a regular basis and compare strategies and tactics used in their ongoing struggles to be treated as equals in their own homes. With this support women feel empowered to "break new ground."

Similar to the women of other farm wives' groups that I encountered in my visits to organic farmers' groups throughout Japan, the women in this group are expending much of their energy on effecting changes in the way the people who are a part of their everyday existence define social relations.

One of the farm wives in the group, who lives in an extended family household with her three children, husband, and husband's parents, explained that although it may be natural for most people to resist new ideas and new ways of looking at things, most people she has known (herself included) have eventually given in to reason. She claimed that by being reasonable and patient, she has been able to convince her parents-in-law, and especially her husband, that certain attitudes and forms of behavior that may have been acceptable in the past are no longer tolerable. She stated:

I grew up knowing that I wanted a family someday that would be able to spend time with each other every day, and marrying into a farm family, where the only son is farming organically full-time, is like a dream come true. I'm working the farm together with my husband, and I'm always here for my children.

The thing is, as the only son, he'd been spoiled rotten. When I first married him, he would leave his dirty clothes lying around for me to pick up and wash for him, wouldn't help with the housework, and couldn't even make himself a cup of tea. All that has changed. He's learned to cook some basic dishes for himself, take care of the children, and try to treat me as an equal. I know his mother thought I was being too severe on him at times, but I think that she realizes that her "only son," by having the chance to share in the raising of his children, is benefiting immensely.

I met my husband at a Youth Association dance party twelve years ago, and when he told me that he was a member of the Okitama Farmers' League, I knew that he wasn't a typical farmer, and that interested me. His close contact with other farmers in the organic farmers' group over the years made him rethink a lot of things, and that's what first attracted me to him, his open-mindedness. Anyway, I'm happy with my life, and being a member of this women's group has not only benefited me personally, having so many friends I can depend on and who can relate to what I'm experiencing, it's broadened my horizons beyond what I had imagined possible.

Born and raised in the Okitama area this woman told me that because most farmers cannot survive on farm income alone, she never considered marrying into a farm family until she met a farmer who was farming full-time organically. When I told her that I had heard from many farmers in rural Japan about the problem of the severe shortage of women willing to marry into farm households, and asked her why she had wanted to become a farm wife, she told me that, in her opinion, the shortage was in large part caused by the way yome in farm households had been mistreated in the past. She explained that, paradoxically, the bride shortage has led to an increasing number of women in recent years willing to marry into farm families. She explained:

With the bride shortage, many farm parents searching for brides for their sons are forced to promise to treat the prospective bride with respect and kindness. Some even go so far as to promise to build a separate house for the young couple so they can have their privacy and will not face conflicts in household management. They're often so determined to maintain the household line that they will go to any extreme to make the new bride happy.

With Japanese women able [theoretically] to be economically independent, educated, and employed full-time, we are no longer forced into marriage, and the days of working farm wives half-to-death knowing that they cannot run away or fight back in any way, are long gone.

Because this was the first women's group of its kind in the Okitama area, the local newspaper asked if interested members of the group would submit articles about how they experienced patriarchy in the farm household they married into, and what they, as individuals, were doing to overcome the deeply ingrained attitudes that perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

Although some of the husbands and almost all of the parents-in-law objected to the idea of the women writing about their experiences of being yome in farm households, five of the wives submitted articles to the newspaper. After the first article was published, the paper decided to run a series and ended up publishing six feature articles in five months. Area women apparently liked these candid articles and the farm wives became celebrities of sorts. By courageously airing their views in a newspaper read by almost all Okitama area residents, they hoped to encourage other area women (and supporting men as well) to resist and overcome sexist attitudes and behavior. This provides yet another example of how cracks in the system (in this case, having free access to the local mass media) can be taken advantage of by an alert citizenry to further the counter-hegemonic project.

The area newspaper also carried reports on events organized by the Okitama Women's Group in the early 1990s. These well-attended events included a concert in 1991 by two women singer/activists from the Philippines, who sang and talked about the social transformation then taking place on the island of Negros, where entire villages were being revitalized by incorporating integrated organic farming techniques learned from visiting Japanese organic farmers; the presentation of an award-winning documentary movie called *Ariran no Uta* (The Song of Ariran), which depicted the cruelties of Japanese colonial rule in

Korea and Okinawa, using historical footage and interviews with former “military comfort women” (sex slaves) of the Japanese Imperial Army; and a slideshow and lecture, in 1993, concerning the trafficking of women from Southeast Asia, who are forced to work as sex slaves at thousands of locations throughout Japan. As one of the Okitama Women’s Group members explained:

We’d decided that it was important for people to be given a chance to see *Ariran no Uta* since it’s such a moving story and it’s antiwar message is so effective. But we were worried that we would end up going into debt because the cost of renting the movie was so high and we needed four hundred people to attend just to break even. Well, eight hundred people ended up coming to see the movie. Women of all ages attended, war veterans attended, high school students attended, it was wonderful. After the movie ended, we asked if anyone would like to offer comments on what they saw, and more than twenty people (mostly in their sixties and seventies) stood up and talked about some of the experiences they’d had during the war that had led them to take an antiwar position. Hearing fellow villagers share such personal experiences with the rest of us I think made us all feel closer to each other. There was a real sense of community.

In 1993, when we invited a woman lawyer from Tokyo involved in the legal support network in Japan to speak about the migrant women workers from Thailand and other Third World countries working in Japan as forced prostitutes in brothels and hostess bars, we were again worried whether anyone would attend the lecture and slide presentation, and more than four hundred people showed up. It was very encouraging.

This woman told me that she had assumed that the local people, mostly farmers, had enough of their own problems to worry about and did not have the time or energy to spare to listen to the plight of others. With no charge for admission, this event raised more than 300,000 yen (\$3,000) for the legal support network from donations alone. One farmer in his late fifties told me that he, as a farmer, was familiar with the tactics used by labor recruiters looking for migrant workers to work in the construction industry during the off-season. He stated:

Hearing those women describe how they were promised this and that by the labor recruiters in Thailand and the Philippines only to find out when they got here that they’d been fooled, made me think about my own past experiences with the yakuza-connected labor recruiters. They’re all a bunch of crooks! And because of the yakuza [organized crime syndicate] connection, everyone’s too scared to try to run out on a contract. To tell those women that they’ll have good-paying jobs as office workers or whatever in Japan only to force them into prostitution after they’re here is criminal! They should lock up all the people who allow this to happen including the politicians, the Japanese police and immigration officials, and the business owners, along with all the gangsters!

That people living in remote mountain villages in Japan can relate to the struggles of farmers in the Philippines; that they can have strong antiwar sentiments and feel compassion for those who suffered under Japanese imperialism; and that they want to reach out to help foreign-born women who are being

victimized by Japanese men involved in the sex trade in Japan, indicates that people in general have humanitarian instincts, and are repelled by acts of violence and by exploitative social relations. The antiwar component that is so strongly embedded in the overall framework of the Japanese organic farming movement — because of the connection that has been shown to exist between military alliances and the internationalization of agriculture — and the transborder solidarity the movement has engendered by the establishment of direct farmer-to-farmer exchanges with farmers in the Third World and alternative trade relations between Third World villagers and Japanese consumers enable the participants to broaden the scope of discussion to include all forms of social injustice and human equality, and allow them to work together to create nonexploitative human relations.

The women's group members are also involved, as individuals, in various projects and activities. For example, one woman is actively involved in a local anti-dam-construction movement. Originally from Chiba Prefecture, she had met her husband at the Christian high school they both attended in his hometown of Oguni in Okitama. She works full-time as a veterinarian and he works full-time as an organic farmer selling rice directly to mail-order customers as well as to local consumers and to the Seikyo Co-op. She explained what steps Oguni residents have taken to stop the construction of a huge dam and resort complex in the area:

This mountain town is famous locally for its beech forest and its numerous hot springs. The proposed dam would destroy the forest as well as many of the hot springs. The proposed resort complex would turn this area into an exclusive resort area for rich tourists from Tokyo.

Last year [1992], the town of Oguni sent a delegation of ten people from the town to visit mountain villages in Germany where farmers and village residents worked together to find ways to attract tourists to stay in their villages. I was a part of the delegation, and we saw barns converted into bed and breakfast inns, tourists learning how to make butter and ice cream, hiking trails through the mountains where local guides took tourists to drink mountain spring water or gather wild edibles, and many other ideas that we think can be incorporated here.

We want to create a hot springs resort area that is in tune with the natural environment, and we want to attract the type of tourist who would be interested in a vacation experience where they can have direct contact with the locals. Planning our own small-scale and locally controlled tourism development project is exciting, and because all the town's residents can have input into the project, it's not as divisive an issue as resort development projects controlled from the outside tend to be. Everyone seems to enjoy being part of a collective effort to revitalize a depressed mountain farming community.

The fact that an overwhelming majority of the town's residents strongly opposed the construction of the proposed dam and the development of a hot springs tourist resort by an outside developer indicates that many rural residents in Japan no longer trust the motives behind the national government's

plans to “develop” a rural area, and that they are well aware of the negative consequences often associated with resort development schemes. That they are coming up with their own alternative plans to rejuvenate the local economy in ways that are sustainable and locally controlled indicates an increased level of political sophistication and social consciousness on their part. When I visited the area in 2001, I found that the town had managed not only to defeat the attempt to build the dam and the luxury resort, they had also led the successful fight against the construction of an expressway through the mountains of Okitama Basin.

Without a doubt, the members of the Okitama Women’s Group are having a substantial impact on the lives of many of the Okitama area residents. Their effective use of the media to publicize political events and influence the attitudes of area residents, has contributed greatly to the politicization of people in the area. With such determination and energy, these women are not only changing familial social relations, they are also changing the course of history and contributing to the advance toward the ultimate goal of social transformation.

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Another member of the Okitama Women’s Group is actively involved in an effort to address the difficulties that farm wives from Southeast Asian countries are having adjusting to life in rural Japan. As noted above, Hikita Mitsuko moved to Shirataka Town when she married Sugawara Shoichi in 1991.

In 1993, a woman who works for the nongovernmental International Volunteer Center in Yamagata City asked Hikita if she would be interested in starting a school for foreign farm wives to learn the Japanese language. Hikita enthusiastically accepted the offer and has since been giving free weekly Japanese-language lessons (including bits of the Yamagata dialect) to yome from South Korea, Thailand, China, and the Philippines at the local community center (*komin-kan*). Since the mayor of Shirataka was the one who initiated the town project to bring in foreign-born brides in 1988, the town government has been supportive of the school, offering free use of the community center, a 150,000 yen (\$1,500) annual budget for teaching materials, and space in the town newspaper for announcements pertaining to the school and school-related events.

Hikita stated that the women who attend her classes have told her that they are very happy to be able to get away from their in-laws, even if it is only for two hours per week. She was told that the husbands, as well as their parents, tend to be strict with them, and that most families do not allow those who are Christian to attend church services on Sundays. The language classes appear to be a mutual support group for these “imported brides,” offering them a space to breathe freely and talk with one another without fear of retribution. In 2001, about forty out of sixty-five foreign-born farm wives who live in Shirataka were attending the Japanese-language classes regularly.

In 1998, Hikita helped to organize a translation service using top students from her Japanese-language class. She has helped a number of students to become officially registered as interpreters. They go to area hospitals and health centers to act as interpreters between hospital staff and foreign-born farm wives whose Japanese-language abilities are still very poor. They are also involved as

interpreters in classes for expectant mothers and women who have just given birth. The Shirataka town office pays the women 1,500 yen (\$15) per hour plus transportation expenses. In this way, these women are able to get out of the house and become involved in community activities, and they are able to earn some pocket money for themselves at the same time.

Hikita is full of energy and new ideas. When I talked with her in August 2001, she told me about one of the many projects she's involved in, namely, foreign-language classes for area residents:

It was about three years ago that I realized I shouldn't just be having fun teaching the Japanese language, I should take the opportunity to learn a foreign language myself. I asked some of the women in my Japanese-language class if they might be interested in teaching their native language, and the response was very positive. We now have several classes in Thai, Korean, and Chinese, all taught by volunteers. They tell me that being able to teach their own language to interested area residents gives them a sense of self-worth and they feel good about being able to give something of themselves back to the community.

Originally, the idea was to get the husbands to learn their wives' languages. Unfortunately, no husbands came to the classes, only women came (aside from my husband, who's learning Thai). Although the women say they enjoy having the chance to meet regularly with other women and sometimes talk about personal problems, I'm sure some of them were disappointed when their husbands refused to participate. You know, in most of the families of the "imported brides," the wives are not allowed to teach their own children their native language. It seems that the husband's family wants to make sure the children turn out 100 percent Japanese.

In order to help overcome the extreme prejudice many of these women (and their children) have to face, Hikita decided to organize cultural events and invite local children to participate. She explained:

I think it's important for the children of mixed marriages to take pride in their mother's native country and for local children to learn to appreciate Asian cultural diversity. We all have to attempt to eliminate our prejudices, so why not do so in a fun and joyful encounter? We're planning on having the events at the town community center since it's spacious and it has a nice playground for the children. Right now, we're thinking about having the events once a month on Saturday afternoons for about three hours. The children who participate will eat ethnic foods, play games that are played by children in other countries, learn some simple expressions in a foreign language, and sing popular children's songs. We have enough volunteers to have a Thai Day, a Korea Day, a Philippines Day, and a China Day event.

Most of the foreign-born farm wives who live in Shirataka work full-time at Yamagata Buhin, an automobile parts manufacturer subcontracted to Nissan Motors. Some work at a sewing machine manufacturer and others work for home appliance manufacturers. The women make 100,000 yen (\$1,000) per month if they put in enough hours of overtime work. Hikita also noted that

Yamagata Prefecture has the dubious distinction of being number one in the nation for having both husbands and wives working on a full-time basis.

Certainly, the foreign-born farm wives are very fortunate in having such a champion of their cause as Hikita Mitsuko. She has helped create a network of support that is desperately needed by these women who are struggling to fulfill the needs of the family and who desire to be accepted as respected members of the community into which they have chosen to immigrate.

Conclusion

The organic farmers of the Okitama Farmers' League are working together to increase the base of support at a regional level for the organic farming movement in Japan. Their successes in various ventures have attracted the attention of local farmers and consumers, as well as of local and national media, government, and business organizations. The OFL example reveals that the need to resolve ideological differences in order to work together toward similar objectives is keenly felt in the relatively closed social environment such as that found in all rural communities in Japan.

OFL members, both men and women, are being invited to speak about various aspects of the Japanese organic farming movement at local elementary and secondary schools, prefectural universities, and agricultural colleges. They are participating in local panel discussions on approaches to rural revitalization; organizing events to raise the political consciousness of local residents and broaden the scope of inquiry; establishing farmer-owned businesses and creating local jobs; empowering rural women; and showing that through collective efforts at the grassroots level, it is possible to restructure and recreate rural society in a manner that is socially equitable and ecologically sustainable.

As the organic farmers in Okitama have shown, it is possible for farmers even in northern Japan, with its long winter off-season, to engage in full-time farming, year-round, by forming organic farmers' groups and establishing farmers' collectives that provide farm-related work and supplementary income during the six months of winter. The increasing numbers of farmers throughout Japan who have adopted organic growing methods have provided the incentive for government agencies at the local, regional, and national levels, to initiate programs to attract more people to take up farming.

OFL members are actively involved in issues that go beyond the survival of individual farm households and include the survival of family farming and rural communities at the regional, national, and international levels. They are developing the confidence to address these broader issues through their interaction with organic and low-input farmers from other regions and countries, sharing their knowledge and learning from each other's experiences. As Sugawara Shoichi says:

Thanks to my involvement in the organic farm movement, I've been to northern Thailand several times for a total of about six months, to South Korea for a week's stay, and to Cambodia four times, ten days per trip. I thought I was going to teach local farmers about organic farming, but I ended up learning so much more from them. I learned about the

importance of family and community, about the need to struggle to revitalize the entire regional economy. These trips also helped me see with my own eyes how so-called agricultural liberalization policies in different countries have led to the destruction of family farms everywhere. These opportunities to actually become friends with farmers from other Asian countries have helped me see our commonalities and given me the incentive to try to make myself a better person.

The growing awareness among the Japanese citizenry of the need to protect Japan's farmers, revitalize rural communities, and raise the nation's food self-sufficiency level; of the health dangers associated with pesticide use and chemical residues on food; and of the negative impact of Japan's corporate activities on those living in the Third World has contributed greatly to the ability of participants in the Japanese organic farming movement to broaden the scope of activities to include not only national but also international concerns.

When I visited the OFL farmers in August 2001, I was invited to attend a dinner party in which members from two grassroots-based organizations in Tokyo (the Japan Committee for Negros Campaign and Alter Trade Japan) and local farmers discussed the positive and negative aspects of a recent visit by farmers and social movement activists from the island of Negros in the Philippines. Although the visitors stayed with host farm families for only about a week, it was generally agreed that it was an enjoyable and rewarding experience for all the participants; hopes for further exchanges were expressed.

It appears that Japan is entering a new age of agriculture in which only people actually interested in pursuing farming as a career will become farmers. Unlike in the past, when the eldest sons had to take over the family farm (knowing that it would involve backbreaking and relatively unrewarding work), many who decide to become organic farmers today do so knowing that it will be emotionally as well as economically rewarding. The organic farmers in Japan, as shown in this brief example from Yamagata Prefecture, have collectively raised the status of farming by showing that family farming can be economically viable, socially fulfilling, politically meaningful, environmentally sustainable, and personally satisfying. Their involvement in broader social issues and their close contact with non-farmer participants in the organic farming movement have led to their commitment to progressive social change. The traditional patriarchal household ideology is breaking down, ties to conservative political parties have been severed, and affiliations with numerous progressive social movements have been formed.

Notes

1. Although the period of time I spent with this organic farmers' group was relatively short, especially by anthropological standards, which usually involve a long-term commitment to participant-observation research, I feel that the information I obtained is important to the analysis of the organic farming movement as a whole in Japan and thus warrants careful examination. I base my analysis on field notes, informal open-ended interviews, and newsletters and articles written by various farmers in the group. I visited the group twice: once in the late autumn of 1993 and again in the summer of 2001.

