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Revitalising rurality under the neoliberal transformation of agriculture: Experiences of *re-agrarianisation* in Japan

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1. Introduction

The form and process of agrarian development and transformation is crucially influenced and shaped by social, economic, political, cultural and ecological factors endogenous to each country and region. This is especially true when it comes to understanding and defining the form and characteristics of farm units (whether individuals, families, or communities) and their social relations, where careful attention must be paid to on-the-ground realities, as well as historical and cultural background that is not easy to access or understand from the outside. Recent work has begun to reinterpret widely-accepted frameworks on agrarian change to recognise this contextual heterogeneity (e.g. Hirsch, 2012; Shackleton and Shackleton, 2015; Rasmussen and Reenberg, 2015). Along these lines, a recent study by Van der Ploeg and his colleagues details the peasant nature of China's agriculture and how it is “reproduced and renewed” in the face of newly emerging, yet dominant entrepreneurial and capitalist (corporate) farming trajectories (Ploeg and Ye, 2016). In their analysis, they find “competing paradigms that inspire and inform contrasting developmental trajectories, farming styles, town-countryside relations and institutional arrangements” (Ploeg and Ye, 2016, p. 254). These examples argue for a more nuanced approach to understanding rural transformation that appreciates diverse contexts and does not distil agricultural development processes into simple binary relationships. The tendency to frame agricultural development as, for example, a political and economic drive toward the “modernisation” of agriculture in China (Yan and Chen, 2015) and the developing world, and the spread of low external input agriculture, multifunctional farming and the notion of “farming as an integral part of social life” in Europe or elsewhere in the West (O'Connor et al., 2006; Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009), and vice versa, needs to be re-examined.

We argue that the experiences of Japan's agricultural development provide a rich context for this sort of re-examination. Rural change in Japan indicates that the boundaries and inter-relations between the two common development pathways and farming modes — modernisation

and industrial agriculture (corporate and entrepreneurial farming) on one hand, and alternative and multifunctional agriculture (peasant-like farming) on the other (Ploeg, 2008) — are varying and blurred. Using Japan as a case study, a country that has largely been off the radar of international agrarian scholars, we also revisit the concepts of *re-de-agrarianisation* and *re-de-peasantisation* and offer a nuanced interpretation of the relational nature of these processes.¹

Diagnosed from the appearance of the farm and farming practices, it is reasonable to characterise Japan's agriculture as “peasant-like,” since there remain a large number of small-scale and less-commercial farm households in Japan. However, most peasant-like farmers have been organised by the agricultural cooperatives (Japan Agricultural Cooperatives or “JA”) with the aim of carving out and maintaining space in the mainstream market via the JA's collective purchasing and marketing businesses. To a certain extent, one could argue that through the JA, peasant-like farmers have been appropriated and integrated into the corporate agri-food system. In this regard, Japanese agriculture has also experienced a process of *de-peasantisation*, but without the structural transformations that would demonstrate widespread “class differentiation.” This is one reason why we characterise Japanese small-scale farmers as “peasant-like” on the whole, while carefully applying the concept of *de-peasantisation* to the transformation process.

What complicates the categorisation and evaluation of *de-peasantisation* and *re-peasantisation* in Japan is the fact that past and current transformations have been taking place amidst an overall downward trend of agricultural production. When we look at the historical data of food production and food self-sufficiency of post-war Japan, it is clear that Japanese agriculture as a whole has been following a course of shrinking and general decline, a course of *de-agrarianisation*, which has been taken more seriously in domestic discourse than *de-peasantisation*. Japanese food self-sufficiency on a calorie basis (39%) is extremely low compared to other major OECD countries, and food self-sufficiency in grain is 29% (by weight) in 2015. For a country with such a large population and economic significance worldwide, Japan is rather exceptional in terms of its consistent downward trend for food security during

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¹ It is important to note that there are topographical and ecological differences between Japan's varied regions, as well as discrepancies in historical development patterns and cultural legacies tied to agriculture that are difficult to represent fully in a single narrative.

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the past 50 years. *De-agrarianisation* in Japan, indeed, has come to the point that rural areas are disappearing (*de-ruralisation*), due in large part by abandonment because of the extreme difficulty in making a living through agriculture or other rural activities (e.g. forestry) (Ohno, 2008). Often discussed in the context of disappearance and preservation of traditional agricultural landscapes (*Satoyama*), the process of *de-agrarianisation* and *de-ruralisation* also causes a loss of diversity (both biological and cultural) and resilience of rural society, economy and the environment, since many struggling farmers and residents located in hilly and mountainous areas are also the stewards of the ecological and cultural landscapes therein (Takeuchi et al., 2003).

Although it is true that ecological and topological limits as well as exploding affluence throughout the last century made it almost impossible for Japan to be self-sufficient,² it should be noted that Japanese food import dependency has been historically and structurally constructed (McMichael, 2000). Japanese food security policy has been built into the U.S. hegemony³; and under the ongoing “neo-liberal food regime” (Pechlaner and Otero, 2008) and/or “corporate food regime” (McMichael, 2009), whereby a free trade agenda has been advanced and domestic support and protection policies have been undermined. Despite every reason for Japanese agricultural production and rural economies to wither completely, we are witnessing, paradoxically, growing and widespread concern and interest in agriculture and food, which in turn is stimulating various efforts and initiatives among diverse groups with the goal of revitalising local agriculture and rural economies. Similar to what has taken place in Europe (i.e. Ploeg, 2008), a young generation of farmers from urban centres and with little experience in farming are interested in pursuing new forms of agriculture-linked lifestyles and settle in rural places. For example, the town of Ayabe in Kyoto Prefecture has seen a significant influx of “new peasants” added to their dwindling population.

We could define this whole picture and trend as a process of *re-agrarianisation*, within which we are observing two competing but entangled perspectives and discourses, namely, the pursuance of a *re-peasantisation* of agriculture vs. a hyper-modernisation of agriculture. We find that realities on-the-ground do not consistently adhere to either discursive pathway, but instead are a mix of hybridised approaches seeking similar goals, but doing so in ways unique to the Japanese context, in which the communal nature of farm management and agrarian communities plays a significant role.

The consistent socio-cultural pressure to cooperate and identify with local community and place, an inescapable “small cosmos,” has influenced farming orientations and new forms of collective-based production in significant ways (Kumagai, 2004). We argue that through this community influence, peasant-like elements persist despite the strong push toward entrepreneurial and corporate farming. Understanding these trajectories of the transformation of Japanese agriculture would then challenge and/or validate the applicability of commonly accepted definitions of *de-re-peasantisation* and *de-re-agrarianisation*.

The paper begins with an outline of the historical development and current state of Japanese agriculture. Then, we elaborate on how and in what way Japanese agrarian scholars have characterised the trend of agrarian transformation, especially the process of *de-peasantisation*, by reviewing Japanese literature. Third, we focus on multiple forms of *re-*

agrarianisation processes in relation to the strengthened neoliberal drive of Japanese agricultural and rural development policies. We also provide a detailed analysis of rural revitalisation activities in Kyoto, framed in a way to be comparable with experiences of *re-peasantisation* in Europe. Finally, and what essentially becomes the goal of the paper, we examine the applicability of the concepts of *re-agrarianisation* and *re-peasantisation* under the ongoing neoliberal transformation of agriculture in Japan.

2. Post WWII decline of Japanese agriculture⁴

2.1. Statistical data: strong *de-agrarianisation* and weak *de-peasantisation*

Since the 1950s and 1960s, but especially after the mid-1980s, Japanese agriculture has been shrinking year by year. A predominant character of Japanese agriculture is the scarcity and fragmentation of arable land, the total amount of which is undergoing long-term decline. Arable land in 2015 was 4.50 million hectares, a decrease of 25% since 1965, and the utilisation rate of cultivated land was 91.8% in 2015, also down from 105% in 1985 and 138% in the peak year of 1956. To make matters worse, abandoned cultivable land areas are increasing and reached 0.42 million hectares in 2015 (i.e. nearly 10% of total arable land), which is more than a threefold increase since 1975. The category of “abandoned cultivable land” is defined loosely as farmland where nothing has been cultivated during the past year or more and that does not have prospects of being cultivated in the foreseeable future. Because this category is considered to be subjective, the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF, 2017a) introduced another category in 2008, “deserted farmland”, which is meant to describe farmland neglected to the extent that it is “physically” difficult to cultivate crops by “usual” methods – around 0.28 million hectares were designated as “deserted” in 2015.

Japanese agriculture is known for its small farm size. The average size of commercial farm households in 2015 was 2.2 ha including Hokkaido prefecture, where the average size is much greater at 23.8 ha. The average farm size would be reduced to 1.6 ha if Hokkaido is excluded. If landholdings by organised management entities (Fig. 1) are factored, the average sizes of the entities are 2.5, 26.5, and 1.8 ha respectively. The number would be reduced to 1.4, 20.5, and 1.0 ha, respectively, if non-commercial (self-sufficient) farm households are included (Fig. 2). Although the decrease of the number of farm households (including non-commercial ones) by 61.8% from 5.66 million to 2.16 million between 1965 and 2015 is theoretically assumed to have been promoted by “structural reforms” for agriculture, the decrease of arable land by 25.0% during the same period hindered the progress of rationalisation. At the same time, larger-scale farms of 100 ha or more in Hokkaido and 20–30 ha or more in other prefectures are rapidly increasing. Nevertheless, in prefectures other than Hokkaido, small-scale farm households of 2 ha or less still account for 80.5% of the total in 2015, not much changed from 86.9% in 1995 and 83.1% as of 2005. Therefore, this slow increase in average farm size can largely be explained by the persistence of “peasant-like” agriculture within the process of *de-agrarianisation* and *de-ruralisation*. To put it differently, Japanese agriculture has transformed without going through the process of *de-peasantisation*.

Further support for this observation is shown by the way in which small-scale farmers in Japan de-emphasise the commercial character of their operations. Fig. 1 lists the number of commercial farm households (*hanbai nouka*) in 2015 as 1.33 million (62%), and the number of non-commercial farm households (*jikyuteki nouka*, or self-sufficient farmers⁵) as 0.83 million (38%). Out of the commercial farm

² Because of the shortage of agricultural production to feed its population and supply to the rapid industrialisation and militarisation in the early 20th Century, Japan colonised several Asian countries to outsource the production of rice (Korea and Taiwan), sugarcane (Taiwan) and soybean (Manchuria) among others (Hori, 2009).

³ In addition to being involved in the U.S. hegemony, or the so-called Second Food Regime (Friedmann and McMichael, 1989), the Japanese agricultural sector has also faced pressure from within: the mainstream export-oriented business community, that seek profits from selling goods overseas by offering agriculture as a “sacrifice,” and import cheap agricultural products from abroad (Ino, 1996; Teruoka, 2008). As a consequence of these external and internal dynamics, “the Japan-centred East Asian food import complex” emerged with the reorganisation of the agri-food industry at the regional level (McMichael, 2000).

⁴ In this section, statistical data and information are largely derived from the MAFF’s, 2015 Agricultural Census and the Statistical Yearbooks of various years unless cited otherwise.

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