

# FACING GLOBALISATION: JAPANESE FARMERS' RESPONSES TO CHANGING MARKETS

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*Abstract:* Internationalization has brought changes to the types of food eaten by Japanese people, and changes too to the types of produce grown by Japanese farmers. This paper examines changes in Japanese agriculture, looking at the various ways in which farmers are responding to and negotiating with the pressures of international and domestic food demands. Some farmers have turned to growing specialty crops, various agricultural goods with name value and organic produce, while others are experimenting with direct marketing and agricultural tourism. I focus in particular on the rise of specialty regional foods, with a description of various marketing and promotion practices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

You are what you eat, goes the well-worn maxim of mothers and dietitians. And of course, our bodies do depend on the vitamins, minerals, and energy gained from food. However, beyond the pure nutritional necessity of eating, we are also what we eat in terms of how we produce, prepare, market, and buy our food. Food is culture, whether manifested in the glutinous rice cakes of a Japanese New Year celebration, the wine and wafers of a Catholic ceremony, or the everyday foods we choose for comfort or as quick snacks. In Japan, however, more and more foreign foods fill the supermarket shelves, and the traditional staple rice has even been dropped from some school menus. In the age of the World Trade Organization, still more concessions to a world of free agricultural markets can be expected. Packaged foods compete with once standard fresh fruits and vegetables. Thousands of convenience stores sell potato chips and instant noodles in the most remote corners of the archipelago, offering the convenience their name suggests, but neither the wholesomeness of fresh produce nor the distinctiveness of regional cuisine (Nagakura 1999: 2).

What does it mean that today's Japanese youths frequent American fast-food restaurants as much as, if not more often than they patronize shops selling traditional Japanese fare? What does it mean that many Japanese schools substituted bread and wheat products for rice, and milk for tea in the post-war years, or that the modern Japanese breakfast

often includes toast, salad, egg, and coffee, instead of rice, fish, *nattô*, *mi-so*, and tea? Not all that much, the detractors of globalization fears might say. After all, the shredded cabbage with French dressing consumed at Japanese breakfast tables shows no resemblance to French breakfast – or any other kind of Western breakfast, for that matter. Many fast-food chains make changes to suit Japanese tastes: the corn-and-tuna pizza, for example, or the potato croquette, or the “rice burger” at McDonald’s. At the same time, Japanese food has spread abroad and has been accepted in and reshaped to fit other cultures. “California roll” sushi with its avocado center, for instance, has made its way from the U.S. West Coast back to Japanese sushi stands. Other American-friendly sushi have filtered out from Pacific Rim metropolises to supermarkets in land-locked, wheat-growing Mid-Western states where there can be little fear of the average resident abandoning American culture in favor of Japanese ways because of an occasional culinary adventure.

While fears of a homogenized global food culture have not been realized to date, changes in food marketing, preference, production and trade have had significant cultural and economic consequences. These consequences have had a particularly hard effect on Japan’s farmers and farming communities. Today, agriculture makes up only 1.7% of Japan’s GDP. Only 6.0% of Japan’s employed workforce engages in agriculture; few full-time farmers remain; and slightly more than 60% of male farmers are over the age of 60 (Maff 1995: 5). Other industries compete for the labor of farmers’ sons and daughters, who themselves prefer more convenient, or at least more stable, working lives. Accompanying the decline in agriculture, remote rural towns have suffered severe population losses, while towns near the major urban centers or high-speed rail lines have found themselves transformed into new bedroom suburbs for white-collar commuters.

The loss of agriculture only affects a small percentage of Japan’s people and a mere fraction of its economy, some might say. According to Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, however, the decline of domestic agriculture has considerably far-reaching effects. Agriculture is the “core of history and culture,” the Ministry has argued; and the demise of rural lifestyles, landscapes, and cultural hearths could mean the demise of traditional ways of life and even a corruption of national social values (Maff 17.12.1999). On another level, the decline of agriculture is of major concern to a nation so dependent on food imports. Japan imports more food per capita than any other developed nation, and is self-sufficient in a mere 40 % of its people’s caloric needs – a worrisome situation in an ever competitive world (Simpson 4.2.1999: 2).

This paper examines some of the changes that have taken place in Japan’s rural regions, and overviews the social and economic factors that

have accompanied shifts away from agriculture. It then discusses some of the strategies that farmers and farming communities have employed to try to preserve their livelihoods, and how some of these strategies have been incorporated into larger development programs aimed at reviving rural communities. I focus for my examples on Aomori Prefecture at the northern tip of Honshû, though they could as well come from Kyûshû or the Japan Alps, as they are measures employed throughout the country.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. CHANGES ON THE FARM

Life in Japan's rural regions changed dramatically in the decades following World War II. Most immediately, former tenant farmers found themselves landowners after Occupation land reforms took effect. Occupation reformers forced large and absentee landowners to relinquish their lands, to divide the land up among those who worked it, and to adhere to strict land-holding size restrictions. However, portioning out farms in a country of scarce flat land necessitated small allotments – one hectare in central Japan, and up to one and a half hectares in the more spacious and sparsely settled, northeastern regions of Honshû. While the land policy quelled potential rural unrest and was democratic in spirit, it also created a pattern of small-scale and oftentimes non-contiguous farm holdings, patterns that plague Japanese farmers today.

The country's post-World War II reconstruction and subsequent economic boom periods also had far-reaching effects in rural regions. Massive construction projects rebuilt Japan's devastated cities and factories, and produced an urban-industrial belt from Tôkyô south along the Inland Sea to Kita-Kyûshû. In what has been referred to as Japan's dual economic system, rural youth left their hometowns to provide cheap labor on the manufacturing lines and construction sites (McDonald 1996: 49–54). Others left to study in the expanded network of national universities, or to search for the freedom and attractions of modern urban life.

At the same time, a greater availability of mechanized agricultural tools made the farmer's life less labor-intensive. Depending on one's perspective, the new technology either freed or pushed farmers from the farm. Mechanized rice planters transformed the once back-breaking work of wading through paddies, as did the wider use of mechanized harvesters

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and more efficient sprayers, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Domestic appliances such as washing machines likewise freed up more time for rural women. Younger sons and daughters, wives, and even farmers themselves could spare time for off-farm work, which became increasingly common as more farm families sought extra cash income to buy the luxuries of modern life and to pay the bills of costly agricultural inputs.

As more people left the farms, many mountain and remote communities experienced such large population losses that government planners and demographers coined a new term: the depopulation problem (*kasomondai*). Two-fifths of Japan's cities, towns, and villages carry the depopulation designation and cover nearly half of all the land area of the country. Similar to the percentage of farmers, though, the number of people left living in the depopulated regions accounts for only 7.5% of the total population (Skeldon 1999: 6–7; Fujita 1993: 47–52). From a flood in the 1960s to a later slower but continuous decline, rural communities lost residents and businesses, schools and services in a downward spiral. Japan's urban cores meanwhile faced issues of over-crowding, high land prices and rents, and pollution. Some observers and residents alike also wondered about quality of life, fearing that Japan's traditional ways and culture might be lost to the economic miracle and Westernization (Huddle and Reich 1975: Chapter 7).

Despite the costs of urban living, rural areas still have trouble finding incentives for young people to stay. Farm families and their communities have to deal with a lack of successors. Though some sons and even daughters say they will take over when their parents retire, problems remain. In some cases, the successor has not had much training in agriculture, having spent years working off the farm. Many male successors also worry about their chances of finding a woman willing to marry into farming life, which entails long hours, uncertain income, and, in more traditional regions such as the Northeast, the possibility of living with one's in-laws.

The economic benefits of farming have also become less certain. In the immediate post-war years, memories of wartime food shortages prompted the government to heavily subsidize agriculture and to encourage the production of key crops. The basis for postwar agriculture, the 1961 Agricultural Basic Law (*nōgyō kihon hō*), sought to keep agricultural productivity high by reducing income disparities between farmers and persons engaged in other industries. The Basic Law was the first of a series of laws aimed at enlarging the scale of farms, consolidating land holdings, and raising productivity (Moore 1990: 86). Long-term, low-interest loans allowed farmers to invest in new equipment and chemicals. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides, seed sterilizers, and herbicides became near necessities for the modern farmer, and propelled agricultural productivity to new

heights. Genetic refinements led to cold-resistant varieties of rice and changed Japan's agricultural geography – most importantly, transforming the formerly famine-ridden Northeast region into Japan's rice bowl. By 1967, Japanese rice farmers could feel pride in being second in the world in terms of per unit productivity (Sum 1972: 242–244), and in the acclaim they received as producers of rice, the national food.

Government rice price guarantees gave an additional incentive to farmers to grow rice. “With rice now enjoying the economic privilege denied to other crops, rice farmers in Tōhoku [the Northeast], and for that matter in all Japan, really have no desire to replace it by other crops,” an observer in the early 1970s noted. “In fact, it is difficult to find any other crop that would fit into this one-cropping requirement stipulated by nature [given the colder climate], and earn so much” (Sum 1972: 244). Indeed, it was difficult for farmers to lose with rice, for rice distribution controls required the government to buy even lower-quality grain at set prices.

While rice held sway in the first two decades after the War, by the time of the first Agricultural Basic Law, it was clear that the Japanese diet was undergoing significant changes, and that the Basic Law had to encourage farmers to grow other key crops. The booming economy meant that consumers had more disposable income and could buy more meat, eggs, dairy products, and fresh and processed fruits and vegetables (Kakiuchi and Kobayashi 1975: 51–55). By 1960, the consumption of fruit was already twice what it had been just nine years earlier. Meat and egg consumption had risen similarly, and milk consumption, relatively rare in the pre-war years, jumped more than four-fold as milk was promoted as necessary for healthy children.

At the same time, though most farm families were turning to part-time farming, the industry still enjoyed a strong political voice thanks to post-war supports for Nōkyō, the agricultural cooperative. Occupation authorities granted Nōkyō banking privileges and the exclusive right to distribute nearly all the nation's rice crop. With its ties to government, the agricultural cooperative acquired quasi-governmental status (Moore 1990: 141). With its disproportionate power of the rural vote, Nōkyō's members and leaders played a powerful role in electing officials sympathetic to farmers' concerns.

By the mid-1970s, it was clear that agricultural policies had to change. Bountiful harvests had led to the near overflow of rice storage silos, and there was growing discontent among urban residents resentful of the high cost of produce and part-time farmer subsidization. In the 1970s, the government began the first of a series of rice reduction incentives, or *gentan*. Farmers received payments for converting rice paddy into alternative cropland. Eventually, as rice farmers strove to get higher outputs from

smaller pieces of land, and high rice production continued, the government even counted land left fallow as part of the paddy-reduction requirements. Though rice was still Japan's predominant crop, and still favored with price and marketing supports, it had lost some of its symbolic and economic prestige. Moreover, while leaving fields fallow reduced labor for farmers, the new conditions did not necessarily sit well with farmers proud to grow the national food. As one author has explained:

Farmers were taken aback. The policy was a complete about-face from the push to boost rice output that had been the norm. Suddenly, they were told not to grow rice ... The psychological impact of this change in policy was immense. No crop had been more valued than rice, and a farmer could perform no greater service for his country than to grow rice. For generations, farmers had considered it a virtue to reclaim land for paddies, a practice their forebears had begun centuries ago. Now, abruptly, they were told that it was more virtuous to abandon those same paddies. (Niide 1994: 18)

Farmers' resentment of the rice reduction policy remains strong. Though rice reduction is in theory voluntary, many farmers dislike what they see as government pressure. Individual agricultural cooperative units (to which the vast majority of farmers belong) receive government loans and subsidies, and can sell rice to the government if their area complies with reduction requirements. The reduction policies have also created a patchwork of tilled and untilled land as farmers calculate how to take the weakest corners of their fields out of production to meet the reduction goals.

The international agricultural market has changed Japan's agricultural landscape and economy, too. With Japan's post-war catchphrase of internationalization (*kokusaika*), foreign goods including agricultural produce flowed into the country. Tropical and subtropical fruits such as bananas, kiwi, oranges, and mango became commonplace on fruit-market stands and, in some cases, had devastating effects on domestic fruit producers. For example, when bananas hit Japanese markets in the late 1960s, Japan's apple growers experienced their worst years ever. Apple overproduction and banana competition caused apple prices to drop to the extent that apple growers coined a phrase: "the mountain and river market" (*yama gawa shijō*). The name suggests prices dipped so low that growers could as well toss their apples in the rivers or mountains as they could transport them to market (Hatae and Saitō 1976: 1051).

Fruit growers were certainly not the only type of farmers affected by increasing imports. Australian beef, Chinese mushrooms, and U.S. grains compete, often at lower prices, with domestic produce. The greater availability of many processed foods – from Italian canned tomatoes, olive oil,

and wine to American breakfast cereals, chocolates, and TV dinners – has also tempted consumers to change their eating habits.

Even protective trade barriers on rice imports have begun to erode due to outside pressure. With the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) talks concluded in April 1994, Japan agreed for “minimum access” provisions for rice. Minimum access requirements obliged Japan to import rice to the equivalent of 4% of domestic rice consumption in 1995, and to progressively raise the amount to 8% by 2000 (*Kyōdō News Service* 4.3.1999: 1). Recent policy scheduled to take place in 2001 will allow for rice over the minimum access quota to enter the country as long as it is subjected to a 351 yen per kilogram tariff, a measure that has frustrated overseas growers and worried Japan’s own rice growers (Simpson 4.2.1999: 1–2, FTAIW 1.4.1999: 1). Fixed tariffs will not stand under current trade agreements, and by the measure of some agricultural economists, if the tariffs and domestic rice prices decrease slightly each year, high-quality foreign rice could equal the price of similar-quality domestic rice in less than a decade, if not sooner (Simpson 4.2.1999: 2). Though the 1999 Seattle talks of GATT’s successor organization, the World Trade Organization, failed to produce any major trade agreement, many of Japan’s farmers and farming organizations fear that the future will bring further liberalization and competition, and thus more domestic farmers going out of business.

### 3. NEW CROPS AND NEW HOPES

Despite the many difficulties for some farmers, changes in marketing, production, and crops have brought new hopes and profits. Some of these changes have come along with larger rural development plans. In trying to tackle the multiple challenges of rural regional development, a number of communities have sought to align their agricultural production with larger community development programs such as tourism. Other producers have promoted their products along with their hometowns in the hope of securing a spot in lucrative regional specialty niche markets. Across the country, agricultural cooperatives have worked to develop local goods with brand-name value, or encouraged their members to grow specialty rice or vegetables. While some communities have sought to refine or promote long-time specialties, other communities have turned to new crops. Still other farmers have taken advantage of new distribution technologies and legislation to make themselves and their crops better known and available to consumers.

#### 4. BEAUTIFUL RICE

Some crops have brought such fame to the place in which they grow that both the place and the product benefit. Since 1981, for instance, the legendary Heian-period beauty Ono no Komachi has lent her name to bags of Akita Komachi brand rice (Media-Akita 1996–98). Akita Komachi is just one of a number of high priced specialty brands known for its flavor. In the affluent decades following the war, Japanese consumers began to demand better quality foods. Taste-testers voted for the tastiness and textures of certain unblended varieties of rice over the blended rice from government stocks. The new varieties and brands have come to garner high prices in Japan's competitive rice markets. Unblended varieties such as Koshihikari and Sasanishiki can sometimes sell for several thousand yen per kilo more than standard government rice (Gemma 1996: 1–9). As of January 2000, for instance, Akita Komachi grown in Akita prefecture sold for 4,300 yen per 10 kilogram bag, whereas average Hyōjun rice sold for 3,200 yen for the same amount (Kawai 25.1.2000).

Changes in government rice distribution policies in the late 1960s also encouraged farmers and regions to change to the new brand name and specialty varieties. Until 1969, nearly all of Japan's rice flowed through government channels. The introduction of the "voluntary" market rice still involved government-approved wholesalers and price supports, but also allowed for the marketing of high-quality, unblended varieties that consumers demanded (Mishima 1992: 43–46). Recently too, further liberalization of the distribution laws has allowed farmers growing specialty rice such as organic rice to sell directly to consumers.

Like many successful marketing campaigns, Akita Komachi's speaks of the place the crop originated and alludes to that place's purported images and legends. Centuries after Ono no Komachi's life, many still see Akita as a birthplace of especially beautiful, fair-skinned women. Japanese and foreign-language guidebooks, and even serious scientific studies, perpetuate the story of Akita *bijin* [beauties], as do Akita residents and visitors (Media-Akita 1996–98). It is the exceptionally clean water and air, many Akita *bijin* observers and residents will sincerely say, that contribute to making the women so lovely and the rice so pure.

Whatever the properties of southern Akita waters, the growers of Akita Komachi enjoy Komachi's fame. Outside Akita's main train station, a one meter-high photograph of the familiar Akita Komachi model smiles down on passersby. She wears a pink peony-flowered kimono, and a straw hat draped with a white gauzy veil and tied with a ceremonial red cord. "Grown by Akita *bijin*," the script beside her reads, "Akita rice, Akita Komachi, Sasanishiki." Sasanishiki variety rice and the Akita Komachi



brand can and do grow elsewhere in Japan, but Akita Komachi has a certain symbolic capital if it comes from Akita, land of legendary beauties and miraculous waters.

Other prefectures have also sought to promote their own specialty brands of rice. Koshihikari, a popular variety from Niigata prefecture, sells under the name Shirayukimai [white snow rice], alluding to the snowy winters of Niigata, a prefecture located at the heart of Japan's "Snow Country" and possibly Japan's best loved rice-growing prefecture (Gemma 1996: 1-9). Tsugaru Roman, a new brand from Aomori prefecture, also bears a name that alludes to the quality of its place of production. Tsugaru, a region located on Aomori's western side, is known throughout Japan for its remote location, agricultural landscapes, traditional ways, and unspoiled nature. Combined with the recent discovery of significant archeological sites, these qualities have led the prefecture to promote itself as Japan's true and ancient cultural hearth. Agriculture is important to the prefecture and to the heartland image, a logic to which former Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato once alluded while on a visit to the prefecture. "Agriculture is the rice seedling bed (*naeshiro*) of the people," Ikeda noted, "[...] Within Aomori Prefecture, Tsugaru is the rice belt. Thus Tsugaru and Tsugaru's households and society are the *naeshiro* of the [Japanese] people" (Hayashi 1984: 7).

Tsugaru Roman, Aomori's newest brand of rice, reinforces the prefecture's preferred image. *Roman*, in this case a Japanese loan-word abbreviation, refers not to the Roman Empire, but to "romance" or "romantic." Agricultural cooperatives across Tsugaru have shifted rice production almost entirely to Tsugaru Roman in the past three years after older varieties such as Mutsu Mahore and Otome did not stand up as well as the new variety in taste tests.

The rice's logo highlights the romance of old and new Tsugaru. Its logo includes a sketch of a woman with golden bobbed hair wearing a suit jacket and holding a bundle of rice. Swathed in bright colors, the advertisement seems to point to the progressive, bright, modern nature both of the rice and those who eat and grow it. However, the inclusion of *roman* alludes to the idea of Tsugaru as the romantic north, exotic yet intimate and affecting. The prefecture promotes its produce in tourism brochures and promotional fairs in other parts of Japan. At local supermarkets, Tsugaru Roman sells for about 3,980 yen per ten kilogram bag, slightly more than average rice, but less expensive than Akita Komachi and other high-priced varieties (Kawai 25.1.2000).

Women known as "Miss Clean Rice, Aomori" serve as beauty pageant winners/spokespeople for the prefecture's rice, and advertise the prefecture's policy of using fewer chemicals on their crops. Some towns in Ao-

mori are specifically trying to make a name through “clean” rice. In the town of Tokiwa in the south-central Tsugaru plain, farmers and the local agricultural cooperative pride themselves on growing organic or nearly organic rice. The cold weather helps them deal with pests naturally, and growing consumer fears and awareness of chemically-treated and genetically-modified crops, have inspired a market for organic produce. To bring wider name recognition to their town, Tokiwa residents highlight the low-chemical rice at local festivals, topping off one festival with the creation of the world’s largest rice ball (*onigiri*). The rice ball has been duly noted by the Guinness Book of World Records, and Tokiwa can hope that this creation will make the local and even national news, thus gaining a place for the name of this town in the minds of consumers (Kanda 1997: 15; AKSS 1997: 108–109).

Organic and lower-chemically treated produce have found a growing market, especially among Japan’s health-conscious housewives. Scares over banned agricultural chemicals on certain foreign foods have occasionally hurt the import market. In 1995, U.S. apples made a dramatic first appearance at Tōkyō fruit stands. However, protective wax coatings and one chemically tainted batch soon deflated consumers’ enthusiasm for the foreign fruit (*World Apple Review* 1997: 62). A recent consumer poll highlighted the importance of food safety. When asked by the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* [Japan Economic News] about the most important food issue when eating out, 51% chose “food safety” as their number one concern (*Mainichi Daily News* 23.11.1999: 8). As a result, organic produce can now sell at higher prices. “Semi-organic” Akita Komachi sold for about 2,350 yen per five kilogram bag in January 2000, while “semi-organic” Tsugaru Roman sold for slightly less at 2,250 yen/5 kilogram bag (Kawai 25.1.2000). Since farmers often receive lower yields on organic fields, the higher prices can sometimes balance out losses. Farmer also spend less money on chemicals and less time applying chemicals.

Organically grown produce is not alone in braving the pests in Japan’s fields, as recently a number of farmers have also banked on the popularity of non-genetically engineered foods. Consumer concerns over new high-tech foods have led Japan’s government to pass a genetically modified food labeling law which will take effect in 2001 (Tolbert 25.11.2000: 1). Domestic soybean farmers have enjoyed a huge demand for their non-genetically modified beans and tofu, even though these can cost up to three or four times more than genetically modified products from the United States. Though the genetic-modification debate may be a convenient pretext to scare consumers away from imports, as U.S. exporters complain, it is an opportunity for Japan’s farmers to grow crops that would otherwise be under-priced by imports. Likewise, it has allowed the government

more leeway in promoting greater self-sufficiency in a wider variety of grains and vegetables.

## 5. SPECIALIZATION

Like Tokiwa and its record-breaking rice ball, other towns have sought to highlight their own special products, whether they are of national renown or just items that set them apart from neighboring towns. To the east of Tokiwa, in Aomori's Nambu region, seasonal spring cold fronts have historically made rice cultivation difficult. Farmers have, however, realized new profits from growing vegetables and flowers. Overnight trucking to Tôkyô and new high-speed rail transport have decreased transport time and allowed even distant regions to serve as market gardens for Japan's urban centers. Greenhouses filled with stock and iris flowers have sprung up in the fields. Other towns have specialized in one crop. The little town of Takko boasts that it is the garlic-growing capital of Japan. A garlic center and garlic events promote the local crop (Carpenter *et al.* 1996: 13), which is made into products of all sorts.

Nearby, the town of Noheji has won fame with its small, soft white turnips (*kabu*). Noheji's agricultural cooperative encourages area farmers to specialize in *kabu*, and strictly reinforces size and shape standards. Noheji *kabu* go to the wholesale market only after careful inspection, scrubbing, and sorting, requirements that raise the costs both for the farmer and the consumer. Too big, too small, or slightly blemished *kabu* may never leave their farmer's field. The consistently high quality of Noheji's *kabu* has made it a star of the turnip world. Fliers accompany the *kabu* to market, informing consumers of *kabu* pickle and side dish recipes offered by local women, and telling consumers about the town and its hard-working family farmers.

The agricultural cooperative's leaders hope that even if Noheji's prices are somewhat high consumers will choose their *kabu* as a known consistent product, and will buy the produce to help out domestic farmers. Other cooperatives and growers have also sought to personalize the farmers behind the produce and to have urban consumers better identify with rural producers. Safety, tradition, small-family farming, and Japan's agricultural landscapes are emphasized and implicitly contrasted to those of foreign producers.

The idea of local specialty crop production serving as an element of local tourism attractions is not a new idea, nor unique to Aomori. One famous example comes from Kyûshû where Ôita prefecture developed its "One Village, One Product" (*isson ippin undô*) campaign in the late 1970s. The

One Village, One Product campaign sought to produce “not a *product*, but *the product* using each town and village’s own resources” (OECD 1995: 51). One village with hot springs built naturally heated greenhouses for roses. Others concentrated on a particular variety of vegetable, mushroom, or flower. Tourists visiting Ôita could tell immediately which town specialized in what crop through handy illustrated maps. It was easy for tourists to decide what to take home to relatives, friends, and colleagues. Japan’s gift-giving etiquette dictates that travelers bring home souvenirs for those who had to stay behind, and food often makes the perfect gift as it can be light, a proper price, and best yet, regionally specific enough to bring back a taste of travel (Callans 1998: 67–76).

## 6. HOMETOWN PRODUCTS AND TOURISM

Rural communities across Japan have turned to tourism in the face of depopulation and declining agricultural fortunes. Tourism development has been envisioned as a way of bringing jobs and income into communities and possibly providing new amenities for local residents. The government too has encouraged tourism development, as well, and in places the country can seem saturated with leisure opportunities. The Resort Law of the mid-1980s accelerated the trend, and during the “bubble years” led to incredible plans for resort construction covering some 30% of the nation’s total land (Knight 1995: 636).

With nearly every city, town, village, and mountain competing for tourists’ attention and yen, communities have sought to develop attractions that set them apart. Numerous rural communities without major landmarks or recreational facilities have promoted their agricultural landscapes and hometown ambience. As in English, the word “hometown” (*furusato*) can evoke deeper meanings than merely the place where one grew up. It is a place of comfort, a home base where one can go to escape the stress of everyday life and recover or discover one’s roots (Creighton 1997: 239). As summarized by former Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru who promoted the revival of *furusato* as a way of revitalizing the peripheral regions, “*Furusato* is a special word, [it] evokes the values of family ties and harmonious social relationships. The *furusato* is a home to the spirit as well as the body, the place where we instinctively know we belong” (Chee-Mewo 1989: 2; Inoue 1991: 34–35). As many Japanese no longer have a rural family home to go to, urban neighborhoods have embraced *furusato* feelings. However, rural communities can still bank on nostalgic longings for lost rural roots. These longings, whether real or imagined, are certainly

not unique to Japan, as the following quotation describing French yearning for the rural suggests:

Here we have a fantasy which urges us to think today that the countryside is the mother of all our traditions, to find in the country the origin of all that honours the national character in our tastes and habits. In this manner, peasant life has become the sanctuary of people's origins, their lost roots, and the source of an improbable authenticity. (quoted in Bessiere, 1998: 23)

The yearning for *furusato* led to a *furusato* boom that spurred *furusato* tourism and a market for *furusato* products. For those who do not have any tie to a true rural hometown, it is possible to adopt, rent, buy, or create a substitute (Ivy 1995: chapter 2). Rural towns from across Japan offer *furusato* products, *furusato* tours and even long-distance community membership, which includes periodic *furusato* newsletters accompanied by seasonal shipments of local products such as rice, pickles, or other specialty agricultural goods.

In peripheral regions such as Aomori and the Snow Country along the Japan Sea, the rose-colored lens of nostalgia has changed the image of rural life and opened up opportunities for tourism development at a time when the future of traditional agriculture looks grim. Whereas in the past rural places were most often regarded as backward and culturally inept, today rural places have increasingly come to be seen as repositories of Japan's national heritage. Rice paddy and agricultural landscapes, thatched-roof houses and old women in indigo kimono have become symbols of a Japan that has nearly been lost to the economic miracle, and as such, seen as invaluable cultural artifacts worthy of protection.

Regional specialty products can have a lucrative cachet. Regional beers and sake, rice and pickles can sell for higher prices, and are found not only in supermarkets but also in the high-priced venues of department stores and specialty shops. Apples from Aomori, grapes from Yamanashi, rice from Niigata, sake from the northern regions and a host of other well-known regional specialties hold a special place in the high-priced gift markets as well, since they have known quality and name recognition.

At the same time, farmers have found it possible to ship their goods throughout the country, and also to get consumers to come to them. Some towns offer tourists the chance to shovel snow off roofs, to milk cows, or to plant rice, previously odious jobs now sentimentalized by those who do not depend on harsh repetition of this work for their daily wages. Others offer "green tourism," the opportunity to pick one's own fruit, to harvest seaweed, or to stay at a farmhouse inn (Aomori Prefecture).

Like many places in rural Japan, Aomori Prefecture has been caught up with its own hopes for a tourist boom. Its governor has announced that the prefecture will become Japan's prefecture of "culture and tourism for the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Among other attractions, Aomori showcases its agriculture, particularly its two main crops, rice and apples. The visitor to Aomori can hardly forget that the prefecture is the apple-growing capital of Japan. Apple-shaped guardrails line prefectural highways, as do billboards for apple products and welcome signs to apple-growing towns. Even towns that do not grow apples feature a wide array of apple products, from apple cookies, cakes, jams and juices to souvenirs such as apple-shaped key rings and lacquer plates, harvesting baskets, and apple-decorated hand towels, ear picks, back scratchers, postcards, and door curtains. In Hirosaki, the apple-growing region's hub city, a four-foot apple statue proclaiming that Aomori grows "the best apples" greets passengers at the train station, and lighted panels showcase the area's famous apple varieties. A few blocks up the street at a city park, the local Lions Club has erected a statue of a naked woman. Unlike her counterparts found in any Japanese city, in a local twist she reflectively holds an apple.

Tourism development is often combined with larger community revitalization plans. Such plans can incorporate a variety of goals, from promoting agricultural produce to providing work for local residents. With the idea that young people are more likely to stay in lively communities with schools, libraries, recreation facilities, stores, and activities, public works and direct monetary grants have been pumped into rural regions. In addition to infrastructure, local festivals, whether traditional, revived, recreated, or simply invented, have been seen as ways of enhancing community life and economic opportunities.

A starting point for a number of revitalization efforts has been the creation or reinforcement of community images, an idea expressed with the English loan-word *imêji*, or, if an old image is thought to need a boost, in the phrase *imêji up*. Assigning a local appellation to the town is an immediate way of conveying to visitors, if not to residents themselves, the community image, and also a good way to advertise local products. Thus, within Aomori's apple growing region, Hirosaki has assumed the nickname of "the apple town" (*ringo no machi*), and nearby Kuroishi calls itself "the hometown of apple and *kokeshi* dolls" (*ringo to kokeshi no furusato*). Soma village used to be a "village of apples and rice" (*ringo to kome no mura*) until the addition of a new recreation park led it to add "village of beautiful stars" (*hoshi ga utsukushii Soma-mura*) to its logo. Fujisaki, as the birthplace of the Fuji variety apples, boasts the name "hometown of Fuji" (*Fuji no furusato*).

Names, of course, are only a small part of the battle for recognition. As with rice-growing regions, some apple-growing communities have also begun to process and market brand name products, thereby adding value to their produce and providing additional employment for local residents. Morita village lies on the northern edge of Tsugaru's main apple-growing belt. Depopulation has hit the village hard, and many families have had to supplement their agricultural incomes with seasonal labor. To try to spark up community life and to lure in visitors, Morita created a special theme park for the community and its agricultural produce. Government grants for resort/infrastructure development helped the town to build a Greek-style amphitheater in which to hold musical, theatrical, and sporting events. Pillars and statues line the stage, and in homage to the area's long-standing sumo tradition, a sumo platform holds a prominent place nearby. Originally, the village planned to recreate more world monuments. However, even though money ran out, the town still declares itself "Tsugaru's World Village" (*Tsugaru Chikyū Mura*).

The Morita agricultural cooperative has fashioned the logo for its brand name apple juice after the World Village. Cans and bottles of the juice bear the image of the Greek amphitheater, and feature happy, whimsical stick figures and the words, "Excuse me, you say Morita village is this sort of place?" (*chotto suimasan, Morita mura e kono hen desu ka*), suggesting that a visitor might be surprised to find Morita such a lively, worldly place. The logo gives the local cooperative's apple products distinctiveness and makes them more attractive for tourists and residents to buy as gifts.

Morita has competition from other towns in the region, however. A larger scale and much more profitable venture can be found some 40 kilometers to the southwest where Itayanai, the "town of apples" (*ringo no sato*), built its own apple-themed recreation park and retail outlet named *Ringo Works* [Apple Works]. Complete with an apple museum, tearoom, processing facilities, and orchards featuring dozens of varieties of apples, the centre also makes its own apple-related crafts and foods. Local women bake apple-fiber cookies, and dye fabrics and yarns with apple tree bark tannins. Potters sell pots with apple-tinted glazes, and weavers make high-priced bags out of apple tree bark. In addition, the centre rents out log cabins set amidst the apple orchards and sells its own brand of apple juice, jams, jellies and sherbet.

The centre, according to one town resident, seeks a high-priced, upper-class image. Ringo Works apple juice goes to market in sophisticated, slender bottles reminiscent of wine bottles and fancy gift sets of jams and juice. The image has proved successful. Tour buses of visitors arrive on Ringo Works' steps. Local farmers sell apples and vegetables at the centre's farm-

ers' market, and the centre features its own fall apple lantern festival, all part of its expressed hope to create a "community of people and apples" (*hito to ringo no komyuniti*) (AKSS 1997: 64–65).

Individual apple growers in the region have also sought to adjust production methods, to promote their family farm's own image and to market their crop in non-traditional ways. Like rice and vegetable farmers, some have moved to organic or low-chemical farming. Others have successfully marketed lower-labor, non-bagged<sup>2</sup> apples by highlighting their good taste and natural appearance. These people have gone in the opposite direction of Noheji and its uniform turnips, pointing out to consumers that food does not need to look perfect to taste good. In a land of straight cucumbers, perfect melons, and nearly identical tomatoes, imperfect food has previously been hard to sell. However, with the recent economic recession and the high costs of growing produce, a number of farmers have tried to carve out a niche for more natural-looking and more naturally grown foods.

Some farmers have also found success through direct marketing to customers. In an age of advanced communications, a number of farmers as well as communities have ventured onto the internet to sell their goods. A quick search of the web can turn up not only information on local agriculture, but also information on the special products of regions, towns, and private farms. Such a trend is not limited to rural Japan, of course: rural communities in Finland, Alaska and other out-of-the-way locations also hope that information technology will be the way to bring down barriers of distance.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Japan's goal of achieving greater food self-sufficiency will be difficult given the free trade principles of today's global trading networks. Though some observers say that Japan's farmers will become more efficient and strong in a more competitive climate, many small farmers will be driven out of business if lower-priced foreign rice is allowed to flood Japan's markets. Japan's farmers make up only a small percentage of the nation's workers, yet in numerous ways the concerns of farmers affect the nation as a whole. The preservation of rural regional cultures and economies hinge on the fortunes of farmers whether they be part-time or full-time cultiva-

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<sup>2</sup> Many apple growers place protective bags around individual young fruit to shield them from the sun and pests. The practice is almost solely for aesthetic purposes and requires much labor and expense.



tors. Likewise, food self-sufficiency and food safety concern urban as well as rural residents.

Although in many ways the future looks bleak, Japan's farmers have been able to adjust to the new climate of internationalization. Organic crops offer new opportunities for small family farmers as well as domestic corporate contractors. Non-traditional marketing methods may also help to form better links and understanding between farmers and consumers. Additionally, the popularity and distinctiveness of regional produce may allow some communities and families to continue farming the crops that mean so much to them.

The preservation of Japan's farming communities is vital to the preservation of important aspects of Japan's food culture. Fresh vegetables, regional specialties, and favored domestic rice are among the ingredients of Japan's modern food culture, even if that culture is now increasingly internationalized and dotted with packaged and foreign foods. Food preferences and production methods change. What remains to be seen is how Japan's next generation of farmers will cope with the host of challenges facing contemporary Japanese agriculture, and whether the nation will support farmers in their efforts.

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