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## **Farmer-Consumer Co-partnership Agreements in Japan**

*Helen Kavanagh (Australia)*

*[Submitted Paper]*

### **Introduction**

Hi, my name is Helen Kavanagh, I am a post graduate student from the University of Adelaide studying alternative communities in Japan: communities which combine sustainable agriculture with an industrial capitalist urban lifestyle. The system we are going to look at is called *teikei*; or farmer-consumer co-partnership agreements (character based languages can be very precise!) *Teikei* is an experience which has radically changed both the farmers and the consumers involved in it and it is something like subscription farming. I have just begun to study this subject and I hope to travel to Japan next year for a first hand look at the system, especially at their decision-making processes.

### **Why look at this particular topic?**

Well, given that our conference theme is '**Designing For a Sustainable Future**', I think *teikei* is important in several regards:

- It is a middle class, urban consumer driven movement. It was the city housewives who demanded organic food. Which is precisely what needs to happen all over the world. So, we will look at what prompted these Japanese women to not only demand organic food, but to be prepared to support farmers financially and physically in growing it for them.
- It has been going for over twenty years and involves more than 16 million people<sup>1</sup>. In other words it is pretty successful. It would be great in Australia! Even if this may be considered an optimistic figure, it is still a significant movement. (Japan's population is around 160 million.)
- Japan holds a critical leadership position in the South East Asian region. The sort of economic growth experienced in Japan, and especially its consequences, presents a vital lesson for other countries of the region, who are now repeating it, sometimes quite consciously.

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<sup>1</sup> See Japan Organic Agriculture Association IFOAM Asian Conference 1993 paper, p11.

So, the reason I am here today is to tell you about a successful system of farming and distributing organic food in a heavily urban industrial society. I think that there is a lot to learn from this and hopefully we can take home some kernel of an idea or an inspiration for our own lives and work.

During the next forty five minutes I will talk about the background of farming problems and pollution in Japan which lead to people developing ideas like *teikei*. Then you will engage in a group brainstorming session. (We can't have me doing all the work!) And, at the end, we will leave with a working knowledge of this particular method of providing, if not a perfect community, then at least a system which has the potential to occupy that important transition stage between what we have now and the sustainable future we would like to see.

## Background – agriculture

Let's start with the state of agriculture in Japan today.

I will begin at the end of the second world war. Of course there was farming before this! But, just as obviously major changes occurred from this time. The American occupation leaders quickly realized the importance of land reform and increased food production in creating a stable political and economic environment in Japan. The country was in ruins, the people defeated and starving, and to top it off, the population was suddenly increased by 6.6 million returned soldiers and former colonists from places like Taiwan and Manchuria.<sup>2</sup>

The first initiative was to redistribute ownership of land from the large landlords to many small farms, this greatly helped to diffuse a very real threat of internal social revolution. You can imagine that the people were in a greatly agitated state around this time and ideas like socialism and communism began to appear admirable to some.

*[Slide of farmer with ox]*

This photo was taken in the 1950's and it illustrates the extent of Japan's modernization 'miracle'. It was aptly named in many ways. Even up to the 1960's it was not uncommon for peasants to share their one roomed dirt floor houses with their cow or horse.

Notwithstanding the success of the American occupation in this regard, Japan does have a very strong tradition of popular protest which continues to this day<sup>3</sup>.

*[Slide of farming women at Narita]*

This is a slide of two women who have been thrown out of their farms which are now part of Narita airport. This shows just one of many instances of determined, though often unsuccessful citizen protest, you may have heard of the furore over American Military bases in Japan for example.

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<sup>2</sup> Nozoe Kenji, 'At Dangerous Crossroads: Japan's Agriculture and Food Security', Japan Quarterly, 1981, 28(2), p218.

<sup>3</sup> Hane Mikiso, Peasants, Rebels and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan, Pantheon Books, New York, 1982, ch1.

The American occupation leaders very quickly realized the potential for Japan as a dumping ground for their agricultural surpluses which were extensive even in those days. As soon as it was set up, Japan's farming industry was offered as a sacrifice, first to the USA's cold war imperatives and endless agricultural surplus, then to provide labour, land and water to fuel the rapid economic growth of the 1960's and now to balance Japan's own immense industrial trade surplus<sup>4</sup>. (In other words the only economically feasible imports with which Japan can balance its high tech exports are agricultural products.)

All this adds up to a pretty miserable situation for farmers. Let me show you some recent statistics: Japan (1988) 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Australia (1993) 3.4% of GDP. It is interesting to note the difference between Japan and Australia in exports: Japan – (1989) 0.4% of exports, Australia – (1993) 27% of exports<sup>5</sup> Also, Japan is only 30% self sufficient in food production (1990)<sup>6</sup>. The lowest of all 'advanced' nations.

In early times, of course, Japan was an agrarian society with most of its population engaged in farming, even by the end of the war 45% of the workforce was engaged in agricultural pursuits. By 1960 it was 27% and by 1988 it was less than 7%. (To illustrate this: in 1988, fewer than two thousand people took up farming, that's for the whole country.<sup>7</sup>) The Australian situation goes like this: 1939 – 20%, 1971 – 8%, 1993 – 4.9%<sup>8</sup>

Japanese farmers are amongst the highest users of chemicals in agriculture in the world and you can imagine the cost in terms of health and environmental destruction. In 1980, the amount of money spent on agricultural chemicals per land unit was ten times that of the USA and the amount of undiluted chemicals used per hectare exceeded 10 kilograms<sup>9</sup>

The average farm size is less than 1.3Ha, with 90% of farms less than 2 hectares. (Apparently the average farm size in Australia is more than 40,000 Ha.)<sup>10</sup> 90% of all farmers work part-time and on average less than one fifth of farm income is earned from the property. Also national farm debt exceeds income and that more land is used for golf courses and holiday resorts than farming.

*[Slide of Golf Driving Range]*

This shows how fanatical they are at golf. They won't even stop long enough for the balls to be collected.

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<sup>4</sup> Ohno Kazuoki, 'Japanese Agriculture Today: The Roots of Decay', Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 1992, 24 (4), p50.

<sup>5</sup> Commodity Statistics Bulletin, AGPS, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Yoneyama Shoko, Prescriptions from the Periphery: Japanese Farmers and the Search for a Survival Strategy, Japanese Studies Bulletin, 1995, 15(1), p49.

<sup>7</sup> All previous Japanese statistics from Yoneyama, 1995, *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Commodity Statistics Bulletin, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Yoneyama Shoko, 'Organic Farming: Japanese Farmers' Search for a Survival Strategy', Asia Pacific Journal on Environment and Development, 1994, 1(2), p76.

<sup>10</sup> James, G., Agricultural Policy in Wealthy Countries, 1971, p. 106

If you add to this:

- Rural depopulation and an aging workforce
- The trade and tariff changes forced through by GATT. (An aside: According to the Dunkel Plan (Uruguay round of GATT meetings), the international standard of acceptable chemical residues in rice will increase by five to ten times the existing limits in Japan. Why? Rice is not considered a staple grain in American or European diets, so they (we!) allow a chemical residue content which would be unacceptable if it were eaten on a daily basis (which we all know nobody does!). Because of the inordinate power of these countries in GATT, these levels are now going to be forced onto all other countries. And if they are not accepted the cry of 'unfair trade barriers' goes up.)

Anyway – back to the subject – given the situation, you will not be surprised to hear that farmers are actually abandoning productive land in Japan to the tune of 380,000 hectares by 1990.<sup>11</sup> I think we can safely call this a rural crisis.

## **Background – pollution**

Now, what is the background to consumer demands for organic food.

Of course there is a baleful history of pollution related diseases characteristic to Japan. There is no need to go into great detail, you probably know more than me about the pollution problems of the world. However, much of Japan's pollution directly affected people through their food.

Minimata disease, or organic mercury poisoning is probably the best known, caused by the high levels of mercury in fish and shell fish. Cadmium poisoning called Ittai Ittai, which literally means it hurts! it hurts!, is another.<sup>12</sup>

But the food poisoning which was most directly responsible for the creation of teikei was the so-called arsenic milk poisoning incident. Due largely to a push from America to dispose of ridiculous dairy surpluses, powdered milk formula was aggressively marketed in Japan from the early 1950's. With the full backing of government and the medical profession, women were encouraged to bottle feed their babies. Besides the claims that it was more nutritious than breast milk, bottle feeding also 'freed' young women to work in the burgeoning industrial sector. (Shades of what is happening in other parts of Asia right now.)

To prevent the formula from putrefying, sodium phosphate or soda, was added to the milk products (no doubt it still is). From April to July in 1955, the Morinaga Milk Factory, Japan's largest supplier of baby formula, used industrial grade soda, which was one third the price of that designed for human consumption. Unfortunately it also happened to contain arsenic and as a consequence over 12,000 babies were poisoned, 600 people died and 6,000 more were permanently impaired.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Yoneyama, 1995, p51.

<sup>12</sup> J. G. Notehelfer, 'Japan's First Pollution Incident', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 1975, 1(2), p351.

<sup>13</sup> Kichiro Shoji & Masuro Sugai, Ch 3 – The Arsenic Milk Poisoning Incident, in Ui J. (ed.), *Industrial Pollution in Japan*, United Nations University Press, Tokyo, 1992.

To make matters worse the mothers' own milk was often contaminated with agricultural pollutants. (DDT, of course, was in use world-wide at this time as well as who knows what.) It was a no win situation. And neither government nor business was interested in redressing the problem. Not surprisingly! So it was up to the people, the mothers in particular, to cooperatively band together to fight for the rights of themselves and their children, a fight which continues to this day. One of the priorities of their campaign was the need to obtain safe, wholesome food.

Hence the birth of the teikei movement.

## **Teikei**

So, we have looked at the problems of farming in Japan and its history of food pollution, these elements provide the background for the creation of co-partnership agreements between farmers and consumers.

### **The Miyoshi Co-Partnership group**

Now let's look at how one particular system (the Miyoshi Partnership) developed and what its guiding principles are.

In the 1970's a group of Tokyo housewives determined to seek out farmers willing to grow safe, organic food for themselves and their families. When they found people from the nearby Miyoshi village who were interested in the idea, they presented their case at a village meeting asking for the farmers to change to organic agriculture. The farmers agreed on the condition that they would not have to suffer a reversal in economic status.<sup>14</sup>

No doubt innumerable meetings of committees and sub-committees were held before the project finally got under way. These are the basic beliefs through which they developed teikei:

1. The function of food is to nurture life.
2. The basic function of farming is to feed the farmer's own family. (This is a novel idea to those of us who think that the basic function of farming is to make money!)
3. To feed your family you must be self sufficient.
4. In a teikei system, consumers are theoretically supplied by the farm's surplus which actually makes them part of an extended farm family.
5. Organic farming requires a higher labour input in which the urban dwellers need to become involved, this leads to a deeper understanding between country and city.
6. Packaging and selection of food is greatly simplified. (It is simply not necessary to present food attractively for sale. Sometimes the mud is not even washed off!)

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<sup>14</sup> Darrell Moen, 'Emergent Culture of Japanese Organic Farming: Miyoshi Producer Group - Tokyo Consumer Group Co-Partnership', *Journal of Social Science (Japan)*, 1992, 31(2) p80.

7. Food is distributed by the members of the group, either the farmers and or the consumers, in this way wholesalers and retailers are removed and face-to-face interaction is fostered.
8. Consumers are required to buy all of the farm produce when it is in season: this leads to a remarkable reform in the diet and shopping habits of consumers. The teikei motto is to 'eat from root to leaf', The simplicity of a rice based diet is evident here: to provide bread or flour is not so easy.

Prices are set by mutual agreement.<sup>15</sup>

## **The ten principles of Teikei**

Now lets look at the principles of the teikei system.

1. To build a creative, personal relationship based on friendship, not business.
2. Planned production based on mutual agreement between farmers and consumers.
3. Consumers to accept all produce harvested.
4. Mutual agreement on prices which are fair to both parties. (This is very important I think, that there is usually no reliance on 'market prices' at all. The so called 'invisible hand' which mysteriously decides the fair market price of a product is a most harmful twentieth century myth.)
5. Exchange of information and communication to strengthen the relationship. The Miyoshi Teikei has the following committees:
  - Committee for the Purchase of Outside Produce,
  - Committee for Forwarding Deliveries,
  - Committee for Enno (Internal) Newsletter,
  - Coordinators of 'Everyone's House'- which is a building in the village built for the exclusive use of city helpers,
  - Committee for Children's Activities – to get city kids and country kids together for camping, nature hikes etc.,
  - Public Relations Committee contribute articles to magazines and journals,
  - Grievance Committee,
  - Committee for Study and Research – organizes meetings, produces a newsletter, runs a library of films, books and cassettes,
  - Committee on Food Life – prepares information and recipes.

There is a lot of information gathering and exchange going on here!

6. Self distribution of produce. Either by farmers or consumers. (Once again the 'market place' is completely avoided, there are no wholesalers, retailers or shops of any kind.)

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<sup>15</sup> Masugata Toshiko & Kubota Hiroko (trans. Iba Mikako), *Diversifying Organic Food Distribution in Japan: In Search of Alternative Systems for Farmers and Consumers*, 1992, pp2-20.

7. Democratic group activities. (The actual arrangement of decision making is very important. Is it a form of majority rule or consensus? This is one of the things I am interested in and hope to research.)
8. Emphasis on self education programs. ( I have already mentioned the amount of committees which concentrate on self education. An example of its importance is the oil crises of the 1970's which influenced the development of ideas such as local consumption of food and energy self sufficiency.)
9. Maintain appropriate group size. In Japan that means keeping the groups small enough to maintain the important face to face interactions.
10. Consistent progress towards the realization of the goals of organic agriculture and an ecologically sound life.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Well, that was a quick look at one example of a move towards a more sustainable future of one country.

I think some of the greatest assets of Teikei are what it does NOT have: there is no notion of *exporting produce*, there are no *shops* or warehouses, no *market pricing*. These are all good things to get rid of. Unfortunately, although it provides a stable and healthy lifestyle for the farming families, the consumers are still locked into wage oriented exploitative lives in a heavily polluted environment. Although perhaps they don't accept these conditions as easily than those city people who do not belong to a teikei group.

Of course it is not all roses and champagne and these groups experience their share of troubles too.

- Some problems at the moment relate to the age of these groups: the initiators who had the enthusiasm and drive are getting older and it is hard to find young people to take their place. The movement as a whole seems to be losing its momentum.
- Housewives, who do most of the distributing of produce, are much more likely to work now. A classic dilemma of modern times: on the one hand economic independence for women is often essential for the well being of their families and on the other it robs society of the ability to provide loving caregivers for its members, especially the old and the young.
- Some groups are just too big and unwieldy and they have lost that face-to-face element which is essential to all of the other principles of the system.
- Another problem illustrates the insidious nature of capitalism. Because of the increasing demand for organic produce it is more and more easy to find it in supermarkets and specialty stores, no doubt imported from Australia or somewhere as well! So the desire for safe and wholesome food need not go hand

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<sup>16</sup> Masugata & Kubota, pp1-2.6

in hand with this unique method of also creating a sustainable community organization, but will be provided by the 'disinterested' market place instead.

Nevertheless, there is a strong commitment to reform in the movement to suit the changing needs, largely of the urban consumers, without compromising its most important principles.<sup>17</sup> This is where I come in – maybe at the next conference I can talk about how these problems are being, or could be, overcome.

To reach a sustainable future we have to travel there, we have to get there somehow and it is how we get there seems to me to be the crucial question. Social revolution, for example, was once heralded as the saviour of the common folk and the world, but it's just not tenable any more. That leaves a gradual change or reform – but how to keep reforms strong enough to withstand the excesses of capitalism, to resist collapsing back into the commercial profit driven constraints, I don't know.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp18-21.