

Socio-Economic Change in Japan's Rural Areas, Evidence of Material Wealth

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Socio-Economic Changes in Japan's Rural Areas – Evidence of Material Wealth –

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Japanese farmers are better off today than they were before the war. Though lagging behind their counterparts in the USA and Western Europe, they are richer than farmers in other Asian countries. A useful indicator of the material well-being is the ownership of durable goods. As indicated in Table 1 a wide range of goods is already within the reach of rural consumers. In four items (sewing machines, washing machines, refrigerators and private cars) the ownership percentage is even higher than that for non-farm sector. In 1968 only 2.6% of farm households possessed colour TV and 30.5% owned vacuum cleaner. In 1975, these two items were so common-place that it was difficult to find farm households without them. Indeed TV antennas have replaced the chimney as the most noticeable features on the roofs of farm-houses.

Table 1 Ownership of Durable Goods (in % of households)

	Non-Farm			Farm		
	1968	1974	1975	1968	1974	1975
Sewing machine	82.3	84.0	84.4	83.4	85.4	86.7
TV	96.3	55.7	49.3	96.6	55.7	45.4
Colour TV	6.3	86.7	90.5	2.6	81.3	88.7
Washing machine	85.1	97.5	97.5	83.9	97.3	98.3
Vacuum cleaner	61.4	91.0	92.9	30.5	82.0	80.2
Refrigerator	82.2	96.5	96.7	63.3	96.8	97.2
Room cooler	5.0	14.2	19.3	0.4	2.3	4.3
Private car	13.7	38.2	38.9	11.4	48.5	55.9
Organ	18.7	25.1	23.7	8.8	17.4	17.6
Piano	6.5	11.5	13.1	1.1	3.5	3.5

Source: *A charted survey of Japan 1976*, p. 123

Living conditions have been much improved with the provision of clean tap-water and electricity. Before and shortly after the war water was fetched from the well by means of a hand-pump. Now it flows freely out of a tap except in winter when the pipe might be temporarily frozen.

The electrification of all rural areas has also reduced the household chores a

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great deal. Cleaning and washing is now less a back-breaking task with the aid of washing machines and vacuum cleaners.

At night the farm-house is adequately lit with fluorescent tubes. The brightness of lighting is a good indication of general affluence. In India as late as 1960, many villages still had no electricity supply. In one case even the village office was lit by candles.¹⁾ In China the farmhouses are dimly lit with a 20-40 watt light-bulb each room as people are urged to save electricity for other purposes. Perhaps of even greater importance is the social significance of electricity. It enables the family to watch TV at night which is the only kind of entertainment available in the rural areas, admittedly some of the programmes are of dubious quality.

The farmhouse has also undergone significant modifications. The thatched roofs (*Kayabuki*) are fast disappearing and are being replaced by cement tiles or galvanized iron painted in red or blue. In Shimo Yoshikawa and Kami Yoshikawa (Chugoku Sanchi) all farmhouses still had thatched roofs in 1951. By 1970, 70% had changed to tile-roofs with about 15% remaining thatched.²⁾

Because of the increasing use of machines, former stables for oxens and horses are now turned to store-rooms or work-shops. Indeed except for dairy farmers and horse breeders farms no longer keep animals nowadays. Even in Hokkaido, the use of animal power is a rarity. (Formerly horses were widely used).

Two other important changes inside the farmhouse are the replacement of *shoji* by glass and the modernization of the kitchen. While it may be argued that the *shoji* has more artistic value, the glass is definitely more durable and gives better lighting to the rooms.

In the age of fire-wood and well-water the kitchen is smoky, always wet and untidy. Now with L.P. gas replacing fire-wood as a major fuel and electric rice-cooker substituting the *kamado*, the kitchen, equipped with stainless sinks and rows of cupboards, is a much better work-place and can be used as a dining room. Thus a functional change has brought about changes in the layout of the farmhouses. This change is easily noticeable in farmhouses built within the last ten years.

Each year more and more Japanese farmers are making pleasure trips at home and abroad. Expenditure on tour increased at a rate of 10-14% annually. In 1970, due to Expo 70 the average expenses on tour amounted to 45,700 yen per household. This meant an increase of 52% over 1969 or 1.9 times of 1967 figure.³⁾

According to a survey by All Japan Nokyo Tourist Bureau, 80% of all farm

1) Fukutake. T. (1971): *Sekai Noson no Tabi**, p. 180 (Reference with * is in Japanese)

2) Sugimoto. H. (1974): *Nippon Minka Tanbo**, p. 208

3) Kayo. N. and others (1972); *Japanese Agriculture: A Charted Survey**, p. 162

households participated in group tour in 1970. Of these 46% went with family and 47% travelled in groups.⁴⁾ In a descending order of priority the regions visited were Kinki, Kanto, Tohoku, Kyushu and Hokuriku. Hokkaido has also become popular as a holiday resort in recent years. In a visit to Hokkaido in July by Pacific Coastal Ferry I noticed the presence of a large group of farmers 50-60 strong, from Kyushu on board. Also in all places of interest, such as Sounkyo, Akanko, Shiretoko, Iosan etc. it was not uncommon to see one or two groups of tourists under the banner of nokyo.

Overseas trips are also enjoying increasing popularity. In the past only 4.5% of farm householders went abroad for holidays. Now it has increased to 18%. In fact the trend is increasing despite economic recessions of the early seventies.

A building boom also existed in the rural sector. In 1971 the purchase of newly-built houses by farmers exceeded that by non-farmers by 3%. In the urban fringe the attraction of cash return is so great that the construction houses for rental is most popular. This building boom has led to the superannuation of farmhouses.

However, all these symptoms of prosperity must be viewed in the light of the following factors:

- (a) *dekasegi*
- (b) changing social attitudes
- (c) sales promotion techniques.

All these factors induce the farmer to consume despite of insufficient cash on hand.

The post-war economic boom and rapid urban growth have resulted in a higher standard of living in urban areas. The rural sector is aware of these changes and wants to have a share of the goods and services available. At the same time various makers of consumer goods would like to capture the rural market.

Since farm income alone could not provide the farmers with enough cash to acquire the goods and services they want, they have to work as seasonal migration workers in towns and cities to supplement their income. A recent study of *dekasegi* problems in Japan has shown that 80.5% of the farm households used *dekasegi* earnings for general living expenses in 1971.⁵⁾

This touches off an ever-lasting chain reaction. Once a person's desire is partially satisfied, his desire grows and he wants more. Thus a farmer, having had the first taste of ready cash from *dekasegi*, will commit himself deeper into the urban labour market next winter.

The economic buoyancy of 1960s also made people forget the hardships of the

4) Kayo, N. and others (1972): *Japanese Agriculture: A Charted Survey**, p. 162.

5) Oshiro, K. (1976): Post-war Seasonal Labour Migration from the Rural Areas in Japan, *Sci. Rep. Tohoku University, 7th ser. (Geogr.)* Vol. 26, No. 1 p. 7-36

war and in the immediate postwar years. Frugality is no longer considered as a virtue but regarded as social inferiority. At the same time, through TV commercials and public demonstration in agricultural co-operatives, manufacturers and dealers are creating an image suggesting that one's social status is proportional to the number of items and conveniences one has acquired. These include colour TV, cooler, piano, electronic ovan and Hi-Fi sets etc.. In an agricultural co-operative in Ugo machi (Akita Prefecture) 120 TV were sold in one stretch. The idea that one should outdo one's neighbour is obviously the background to this success and is very much on the farmer's mind as it is on the urban consumer's.

In this consuming frenzy, the farmer has succumbed not only to his desire to possess, but also to new sales techniques. In order to promote sales of furniture, the maker offers *kengaku* tours to prospective clients with such attractions as overnight stop-over in hot-spring resorts. Then step by step the customers are eased into signing a purchase contract.⁶⁾

In the sale of motor cars the farmers are persuaded to use the cars first and pay later with easy credit terms. As a result, the farmers have acquired a wide range of goods in their homes today than they ever could before. Because they are spending beyond their means, they are often in debts, to the extent of 10,000 yen to 20,000 yen per month.⁷⁾

It seems the spending habit of the farmers changes little with time. In the old days, the financial situation of farmers was well summarized by this saying: *mitsuki choja, komari yatsuki*. Today, because of *dekasegi* earnings, he might not be as bad as before. Nonetheless, he is not that well-off as the range of consumer goods in his possession might have suggested.

Breaking down of old traditions and values

Before the war the personality of a peasant was formed round the family and the village. The head of a household was the centre of authority. His duty was to see to that members of the family keep their respective places and he demands the subjugation of personal desire and interest to those of the family. Similarly the village, disapproved of free individual action taking precedence of communal effort as was required in the production of rice. A social class based on the relationship between the landlords and tenants also existed. The landlord's authority was instrumental to the maintaining of peace and order in the village.

The peasant's way of life was one of subservance to traditions, of submission to authority and having good relation with one's neighbour. This was not changed

6) Kahoku Shinpo-sha ed. (1975): *Japanese Villagers**, p. 103

7) *ibid.* p. 105

until after the war.

The ideology that agriculture is the foundation of the nation, had a firm hold over the rural population since feudalistic times. In the old social order, peasants were ranked only second to *samurai*. This apparent respect was given to the peasants as a compensation for their acceptance of the hardship and low standard of living of the village.

With the process of urbanization this ideology showed signs of weakening, but was held together by the special indoctrination during the war centered on the Imperial image. This pressure was removed after the war. The post-war Land Reform went further to sweep away the feudalistic landlord tenant relationship and brought about the disintegration of *mibun-kaiso-sei*. The social restrictions of the village based on the authority of the landlords collapsed and the forces of tradition particularly the authority of the head of household were weakened.

Drastic changes are also seen in agricultural production. Before the war poverty and insecure tenancy prevented the farmers from improving their land. Now improved yields mean increasing income and farmers are interested in the introduction and application of new technology. Though Japan's agriculture still centres on the production of rice, its fruit production has doubled its pre-war record and livestock has remarkable development. Thus Japanese farming has emerged from a subsistence crop economy into cash crop economy. It relies not only on the urban and industrial sector for its machines, fertilizers and insecticides but also on the urban markets for its products.

The advent of mechanization, however, is not all that advantageous. The widespread use of planting machines, binders and combines for rice crop has brought about the weakening of past neighbourhood ties which existed because of the need to exchange labour for planting and harvesting. Today farmers are loosely and individually connected with urban areas through *dekasegi*. The good relationship which once existed between neighbours is disappearing as few know or would care for what their neighbours are doing. In its place is a dwindling sense of belonging and unity formerly generated by the limited confines of the village.

Changing life style and the vanishing *furusato*

The availability of consumer goods to the rural market causes changes in the life style of the farmers. The TV commercials, the fashion magazines and other forms of mass media diffuse current trends in clothing, food and other conveniences thought to be indispensable in modern living into the rural areas. Therefore, the difference between country and city life is only a matter of degree in sophistication. For instance country clothing is three to four years behind in fashion and in materials used. Motor vehicles serve a dualistic functions i.e. transportation of

goods and passengers. Thus high speed, two-door coupes are almost non-existent. Because of rough road conditions and much cheaper prices, second-hand cars are prevalent.

Perhaps a far-reaching and obvious influence is the inroad of preserved food stuffs such as ham sausages, frozen meats, canned fish products etc. into the rural market. This is particularly so in mountain villages where transportation problems and a limited market have made it economically nonviable to have fresh meat and fish shops (Writer's observation in Oizawa mura, Yamagata). Nowadays, rural school children no longer bring home-made lunch-boxes back to school because their mothers work as *dekasegi* workers in urban areas. This also accounts for the scarcity of vegetable plots, chickens and pigs (which form part of the rural landscape in many parts of Asia and was definitely a common sight in rural Japan some thirty years ago) in the Japanese countryside.

In China today villagers are encouraged to keep a few chickens, ducks, and one or two pigs per household not only to be self-sufficient in animal proteins, but also to provide the necessary organic fertilizers. During a visit to Shashiyu, a mountain village in Hopei Province near the Great Wall in 1975, I noticed chickens and ducks feeding freely in the courtyards and pigs swirling in the pigsties. At lunch we were served with locally produced food-stuffs. I have been taking the fresh chicken, fish and pork for granted till I visited Oizawa (Yamagata) when preserved meat and fish were served with other *tsukemono*. Only the eggs and *sansai* were fresh. But the eggs were supplied from a nearby market town.

It may be argued that the supply of preserved food-stuff enables the villagers to have a wider range and choice of food. However, it also brings about the partial disappearance of fresh food from the dining table resulting in a standardization of taste no matter where it may be. This is a regrettable trend. By expanding their sales into the rural areas the food-processing manufacturers and traders bring about a degeneration of an important aspect of the life of the farmers. In ten years' time one might look nostalgically for the countryside flavour (*inaka no aji*) that no longer exists. This is perhaps the price of urbanization of rural areas. Admittedly, all changes have their price-tags. The question one should ask: is this price too high?

Underdeveloped social facilities

At the 11th Peasants' Health Conference held on 29th January 1970 in Tokyo a representative from Iwate complained the lack of medicare.

"Although national health clinics are set up in rural areas, there are no residential doctors. The Prefecture gave scholarships to medical students on the conditions that they serve the rural areas after graduation. But once graduated

they prefer to refund the money rather than go to serve in the countryside. The peasants rely on the doctors not only for cure of diseases, but also for illness prevention and farm chemicals poisoning. Therefore the national health insurance has no meaning and is nothing more than a certificate. Each year the Health Ministry promises to find a solution to this problem of scarcity of doctors in isolated areas. But what has been done is the handing out of a small allowance as subsidies to medical expenses. This is nowhere near a solution. It is better to despatch doctors, in case of need, from the main hospitals in areas where motor cars can be used, the Ministry argues. But is it not even in the main hospitals there is also a lack of doctors?"⁸⁾

Deficiency of doctors certainly is a serious social problem in Japan today. Many health centres and clinics are understaffed e.g. hospitals by 23%, clinics 20%, visiting clinics 45%. In the past twenty years many national health clinics were closed down or had their premises transferred to practising doctors. The lack of doctors in rural areas is particularly serious as most doctors stay in the cities. According to data provided by the Ministry of Health, the big cities have 13 doctors per 10,000 population, other urban areas 11.6 and rural areas 6.0.⁹⁾ It is, therefore, not entirely unexpected that no doctors can be found in mountain villages or other isolated rural areas. The plight of villagers in Tokamachi (Niigata) is a graphic example of this situation. Because the nearest clinic is several kilometers away, in summer the journey takes about 30 minutes by car. In winter it takes two hours or more on foot. Patients in serious conditions have to be carried in sleighs and this takes several hours. Unless there are many cases of illness doctors will not come even they are requested.¹⁰⁾

Education in rural areas also presents a problem. Because of depopulation, schools are few and inadequately equipped. In mountain villages and mountain farming settlements practically no junior high schools exist. More often than not the whole primary school has less than 50 students, in two or three classrooms.¹¹⁾ The lack of teacher, space and equipment make it necessary to put several grades in one class and taught by one teacher. This situation is far from satisfactory. As bus services are few and infrequent in a mountain village the children have to walk or cycle three to four kilometers each way to school. While this gives the children ample opportunity to exercise their bodies, it does reduce considerably their time

8) Wakatsuki, T. (1974): *Fighting Against Illness in Villages**, p. 226

9) *ibid.* p. 227

10) Tsumari Women Education Promotion Group ed. (1976): *Heavy Snow and Depopulation**, p. 41

11) In the case of Kami Yoshikawa, the number of students was reduced from 35 in 1964 to 15 in 1970 with no new student enrolment in 1971. Source: Sugimoto. H. (1974): *Op. cit.* p. 208

available for study. In winter with deep accumulation of snow in many mountain areas in Tohoku and further north, attending school is also very energy-consuming.

As school children have to use mountain paths in the valleys there is always the risk of avalanche caused by the accumulation of fresh snow on old surfaces or smelting in spring. Though loss of life is rare, the mental burden on the mothers is great. They are not at ease until their children return safe from school.¹²⁾

It can be seen from any 1:25,000 map that the Japanese countryside is well provided with roads. Indeed few rural settlements are inaccessible to vehicles. But the existence of roads does not provide a real picture of the communication problems many rural areas face. What actually matters is the nature and frequency of public transport running on these roads. In this respect the rural areas, particularly mountain villages are poorly served. For instance, Oizawa has only three bus services daily to Masawa the nearest small town, where a bus goes to Yamagata six times a day. The trip from Masawa to Oizawa takes about 2 hours with at least one third of the journey on poor roads. In winter communication is often delayed and disrupted by heavy snow.

In 1974 of a total agricultural labour force of 5.9 million, 56.4% were female and 43.6% male. Those above the age of 60 accounted for 22% of the total. In rapid depopulated areas the proportion was as high as 26% (Table 2). This increasing percentage of female and the aged in the rural population referred to as *sanchan*, adds gravity to the transportation problem as few females have driving licences and many are too old to drive (if they do possess them). Hence an efficient bus service is essential to their keeping contact with other communities. As already pointed out the bus service in rural areas is in such an inadequate state and communication between villages and other urban areas is hardly as simple and

Table 2 Agricultural Structure in Rapidly Depopulated Machi and Mura

		Depopulated Areas	All Japan
Population changes (1960-65)		-15.0%	5.2%
Labour force engaged in agriculture (1965)		60.1	22.8
Age structure of agricultural labour force	15-19 yrs	1.3	2.7
	20-29	8.5	12.8
	30-39	21.5	24.3
	40-49	21.9	22.0
	50-59	20.8	19.7
	60+	26.0	18.5

Source: Imai, S: *Japan's Depopulated Zones*, p. 173.

12) Tsumari Women Education Promotion Group ed. (1976): *Op. cit.* p. 42

easy as the network of roads on the map has suggested.

Drawing up the balance sheet

The Basic Agriculture Law of 1961 has among other things the following two major objectives:

- (a) the parity of agricultural and industrial income
- (b) the formation of economically viable farm households.

It must be said that it fell short both of its goals. Though farm household income exceeded urban worker household income by 17% in 1976, it should be noted that income per working member of the former is about 64% of the latter. In the case of urban households it is the men and wives who are usually working whereas in farm households all members including the parents of the householders have to work. Moreover their working days often exceeds eight hours.

After 1968 the disparity between farm and nonfarm income decreased. However, this was not the result of agricultural labour productivity catching up with industrial labour productivity. But rather it was due to rising farm prices and part-time work (*dekasegi*) in urban areas. In the ten years between 1960 and 1970 the proportion of farm income decreased steadily from 55% in 1960 to 36% in 1970. In other words 64% of the farm household income came from part-time earnings. This clearly indicates that no parity exists between agricultural and industrial income.

All over Japan the trend is towards part-time employment and abandonment of farming as an occupation. Hence full-time farmers only account for 13% of the total farm households and depopulation becomes a major problem in all mountain villages and mountain farming settlements. All these suggest positively the failure of the second objective of the Basic Agriculture Law.

It may be argued that the material well-beings of the Japanese farmers are good indications of the soundness of Japanese agriculture. Indeed data of possession of durable goods such as colour TV, motor cars, refrigerators and others have often been quoted by politicians seeking re-election to office. But behind this superficial facade of prosperity many basic issues concerning the rural areas are still left unsolved. These are:

- (a) depopulation of rural areas
- (b) provision of adequate social facilities such as medical, educational and transportation services
- (c) reliance on *sanchan nogyo*
- (d) *dekasegi* or exploitation of rural labour by the industrial sector
- (e) revitalization of the rural economy.

Unless serious attempts are made to find a satisfactory solution to these issues, the situation is likely to deteriorate with time and the possibility of undoing this Gordian knot is even remoter in future.