Words and Experiences that Reaffirm the Values of Farming and Rural Life: Findings from Qualitative Interview Research in Fukui Prefecture, Japan

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research questions

An important phase of the contemporary rural problems in highly industrialized societies like Japan is that various social representations and meanings of agriculture and rural life have appeared and compete with each other relatively independently of the actualities of farming and rural society (see Tachikawa, 2005; Akitsu, 2007). In this competition, the urban side has gained a significant advantage in exercising a powerful effect on the way Japan’s agriculture and rural society are defined.

This situation is in itself not undesirable or harmful, because growing interest and concern about the countryside can play an important role in reaffirming the values of farming and rural life. However, the languages of the urban side are so policy centered and consumer centered that they diverge from the actual contexts of farming, rural living, and local communities. They may romanticize rurality rather than empower rural people. The most serious problem is that the voices from the countryside tend to be expressed and heard to a lesser degree, although various efforts to speak out have been made. To reaffirm the values of agriculture and rural life, we have to have deep regard for the voices of rural people who talk about these values in terms of their real experiences in farming and rural life. This is why we conducted interviews with rural people.

Through the interviews, we examined the following questions. First, how do rural people, particularly active farmers and residents, value their farming and rural lives? Second, with what vocabulary and rhetoric do they talk about those values? Third, is there any significant relationship between their narratives and their life experiences in farming, family life, community life, the media, and so on?

Keywords: Values of Farming and Rural Life, Words and Life Experiences, Epiphany, Qualitative Interview Research

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 5th International Conference of the Asian Rural Sociological Association, September 2, 2014, at the National University of Laos, Vientiane. This paper reworks and extends the latter part of our previous paper (Ito, 2011).
1.2 Methods
To answer the above questions, we conducted semi-structured interviews to collect the narratives of various types of active rural people in the northern area of Fukui Prefecture. The interviewees (research participants) were selected using snowball sampling. The criteria of selection were that (1) the interviewees should be active in their farming or rural activities (such as rural tourism, direct transaction between farmers and consumers, etc.), (2) they should have some clear views on farming and rural life, and (3) various types of rural residents (old, young, men, women, natives, newcomers, farmers, non-farmers, and so on) should be included. We call these people “rural actives.”

At the first stage, we selected several persons from among our acquaintances using these criteria, and through their introducing us to others, we recruited more participants using the same criteria. Since 2010, we have interviewed 29 people. The interviewee characteristics are summarized in Table 1. With 22 open-ended questions, we asked them about their values of, motivations for, and satisfactions and dissatisfactions with farming, farmland, family life, and community life, as well as their life experiences and social relations. In total, we collected about 50 hours of audio-recorded interviews.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. Analysis and interpretation were carried out for the transcribed texts through the following procedures: (1) “Meaning condensation,” in which the meanings expressed by the interviewees in each natural meaning unit were abridged to shorter formulations, (2) “Meaning categorization,” in which longer statements were reduced to simple categories, and (3) Identification of the rhetoric or structure of the argument in the narratives (see Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In the formulation and categorization, we emphasized using the interviewees’ own wording and idioms as much as possible.

Table 1: Interviewee Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30s</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>5 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40s</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50s</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60s</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 (1)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70s and over</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td>19 (2)</td>
<td>10 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>29 (6)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number in parentheses indicates non-natives included in the total. The asterisk indicates non-farmers.

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2 Farming in Fukui is characterized by a stable part-time family farming with a concentration on rice cropping, which is the most dominant type of farming in Japan (see Ito, 1996). Nearly 90% of the total farm households in Fukui are classified as the “Class II” part-time farm household in which the main source of income is earned from off-farm jobs. Most of farm families apply their labor force to off-farm jobs in the form of full-time employment, such as office workers, factory workers, sales & service workers, and public officials. On average, 76% of the gross income for each farm household is earned from off-farm jobs. According to the 2010 Census of Japan’s Agriculture, 94% of the total farmland in Fukui are in paddy fields and rice cropping produces 66% of the total agricultural output.

3 We are aware that the limited number of the interviewees cannot cover the full range of values and meanings around farming and rural life in Fukui, much less in Japan; therefore, we continue our research to extend the cases. However, we are confident that the interviewees cover the main types of active rural people and we touch the core of the world of meanings around the rural in the countryside of Japan today.
2. Findings

2.1 Outline of findings
First, we provide a general outline of the findings. **Box 1** shows the summarized statements of the interviewees’ narratives on the values of farming and rural life using their own wordings and idioms. Each statement is a summary of the value-narratives that we found to be common to the majority of the interviewees. Although there were also various interesting findings on the variations or differences of value-narratives according to the interviewee’s age, sex, career, etc., here we focus on the common features in values across such types.

**Box 1: Summarized Statements of Interviewees’ Narratives on the Values of Farming and Rural Life**

1. Farming is, first of all, a **way to earn a livelihood** and the **basis of living**. At the same time, it means being involved in **life** 生命, that is, growing living things and taking them for human food as the blessings of nature. Therefore, it is **very worthwhile work** that gives one deep **pride as a hyakushō 百姓 (farmer)**.

2. The attraction or fascination with farming lies in the **freedom** 自由 of planning and practice, the **joy of harvest**, and the **communication with and evaluation by consumers**. On the other hand, the difficulty of farming lies in **poor harvest** due to unseasonable weather, **lack of time to spare**, and **lower price** of agricultural products.

3. Farmland is the **basis of agriculture and living**. It is also a precious **ancestral property** passed down for generations. With **thanks and respect** for **senzo 先祖 (ancestors)**, we should **maintain** it carefully and **hand over it to the next generation**.

4. The goodness of rural life lies in the **warm humanity** 人情 and **spirit of mutual help** 助け合い, which have gradually weakened but can still be seen in the various scenes of community life.

5. Indeed, **social relations and duties** つきあい in rural communities are often **troublesome** and **time-consuming**. Yet one can expect warm humanity only when one maintains the relations and **takes on one’s duties**.

6. There are some **old-fashioned** and **feudalistic** aspects of these relations and duties. We have to **change** them to **welcome new people** (newcomers, tourists, and strangers) for the **survival** of rural communities.

7. Our earnest wish is to **lead our lives in the countryside as long as possible** by earning a living through farming and other jobs, **supported by family and friends** with whom we can share our **dreams** 夢.

Bold letters indicate the interviewees’ own wording.

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4 For reasons of space, we have omitted the details of these seven statements except No. 1 and No. 3.
2.2 Old words with new meanings: *Hyakusho* and *senzo*

Reading through the narratives on values, we noticed that some old words, the seemingly old-fashioned and conventional words, have new and/or unique meanings. These are sometimes expressed self-consciously and sometimes unconsciously. Here we describe two typical examples. One is *hyakusho* 百姓 (farmer) and the other is *senzo* 先祖 (ancestor).

*Hyakusho*

*Hyakusho* is a very old term. It originally meant “common people” or “farmer” and had no discriminative connotation. However, in the modern period, it has often implied being poor, vulgar, ignorant, or outdated. Furthermore, it has been regarded as a politically incorrect term in the mass media, education, and in official use, except as a self-descriptive expression. Recently, however, it is said that some active farmers have begun to use this term self-consciously to show their pride in their work (see Kishi, 2009).

In the case of the interviewees in this research, to our surprise, almost everyone talked about the word *hyakusho* favorably, showed respect and admiration for *hyakusho*, and talked about its various meanings. Moreover, half of the interviewees proudly declared themselves *hyakusho*. **Box 2** shows five examples of the narratives\(^5\) on *hyakusho*.

**Box 2: Examples of Narratives on *Hyakusho***

1. “For me, *hyakusho* is a symbol of resistance against misgovernment, freedom from the direction of others, and also a pleasure of farming.” [Male, 60s]
2. “*Hyakusho* is a job for which we should master a hundred skills such as chemistry, biology, meteorology, and so on. *Hyakusho* must learn over a lifetime.” [Male, 50s]
3. “If you break down the Chinese character 百姓 into parts [百/女/生], you can find that *hyakusho* is a hundred ways of women’s life!” [Female, 30s]
4. “I call myself *donbyakusho* [mere farmer] to give myself a warning against seeking profit and to aim for my goal of producing foods for other people.” [Male, 40s]
5. “*Hyakusho* is not just a business or industry, but a way of living in a rural community. So you must work together for the community without payment, even though it doesn’t contribute to your own farming directly.” [Male, 60s]

These narratives were given by people who became farmers after having pursued careers in other off-farm jobs. They seemed to be more aware of the significance of their farming in contrast with their former jobs. For them, farming is not just an occupation or a way of earning money but a way of life and a way of relating with other humans and nature. The politically correct term to signify a farmer in Japanese is *nogyouousha* 農業者 or *noumin* 農民, but this does not convey the real sense of these farmers. The term is used only in formal settings. Instead, the farmers choose to use the old term that is potentially rich in meaning. It is true that there are some people who do not think of themselves as *hyakusho* and instead describe themselves using another term with a different meaning, as in No. 2 and No. 3 in **Box 3**. However, we can confirm that there has been a drastic transformation of the meaning of *hyakusho* from negative to positive, and *hyakusho* is now a very important key word for farmers to talk about the values of farming.

\(^5\) The examples of narratives are not literal translations from the original transcripts in Japanese but summarized statements of the transcripts.
Box 3: Other Examples of Narratives on Hyakusho

1. “I have respect for hyakusho but I don’t think of myself as hyakusho, because I have not yet achieved mastery of farming.” [Female, 30s]

2. “I think of myself as a nougyouka 農業家 (professional farming manager) [coined expression], because I engage in farm work and run my agricultural company at the same time. I have respect for hyakusho as masters of farming, but the word doesn’t connote professional management.” [Male, 30s]

3. “I have a respect for hyakusho, but I think it’s for the elder generations. I call myself nougyou-seisannin 農業生産人 (agricultural producer) [coined expression], because into this word I put my wish for being professional in production and management.” [Male, 30s]

Senzo

Senzo (ancestor) is also a very old term with many traditional meanings. It has been regarded as the most important key to the traditional Japanese family system, faith, worship, customs, and so on (see, e.g., Yanagita, 1970 [1946]). Although there have been some fundamental changes to rural families, we often still hear narratives around this term. The same was true in the case of the interviewees.

The word senzo appears very often in the narratives about farmland and its succession, as in the examples in Box 4. In most cases, the interviewees expressed their respect and thanks for senzo, who developed, kept, and left farmland to their descendants. Although the narratives on senzo seemingly express an old-fashioned conservative idea, a careful reading of the narratives reveals that the meanings attached to senzo are both traditional and trans-traditional.

Here we focus on the usage of senzo-dai-dai-no-tochi (ancestral farmland) to point out the trans-traditional meanings of senzo used among the interviewees. Senzo-dai-dai-no-tochi usually means that the farmland belongs to the patriarchal family and that it should be maintained and passed on from a father to his son, the heir. It is notable that more than a few of the interviewees hoped their children would take over the family farming and farmland, but they in no way insisted that there should be a traditional continuation by the direct family heir. Rather, they insisted that farming and the farmland should be maintained and taken over from generation to generation by someone who has a strong will to farm and lead a rural life. In fact, they welcomed newcomers from cities and were ready to teach and assist them in their resettlement. In the context of their narratives, as in No. 5 and No. 6 in Box 4, the term senzo seems to go beyond the conventional usage to refer to the forerunners of a community beyond each household and blood relations, and to imply a sense of common ownership over the generations.
Box 4: Examples of Narratives on Senzo

1. “Thanks to our senzo, we can live on. We will follow the road that our senzo laid out.” [Male, 60s]
2. “I’m conscious of my senzo when I cultivate the paddy fields that my senzo [grandfather and great-grandfather] developed and left for us. I thank the senzo whenever we harvest rice.” [Male, 60s]
3. “I didn’t want to abandon our farmland when my father gave up farming. I made up my mind to start farming instead of him, because the land had been kept and left for us by my senzo, I mean, my late grandpa and grandma.” [Female, 30s]
4. “I didn’t feel senzo or have a sense of ancestral farmland until my husband’s grandmother passed away after we had lived together for several years. Now I feel her as senzo and I have come to think we should cherish our ancestral farm.” [Female, 30s]
5. “I have a sense of senzo-dai-dai-no-tochi [ancestral farmland] not only for my own family’s land but also for the lands of other farm families that I borrow by contract. I think we should cherish all the farmlands of our community that our senzo, our predecessors, made every effort to develop and keep. And we should hand over farmlands to someone who can keep farming and maintain the community in this area. It doesn’t matter if the successors have a blood relationship or not.” [Male, 40s] (Underlines added)
6. “As an heir of my family, I have succeeded to my father’s farm, so I have a strong sense of senzo-dai-dai-no-tochi [ancestral farmland]. But it’s getting harder and harder for each family alone to keep the land and farm. We have to work together. So I have established a company with my young neighboring farmers to keep our farming and community going permanently.” [Male, 30s] (Underlines added)
7. “I wish I could keep my ancestral farmland, home site, and ancestors’ tomb forever. But, as I have to retire from farming in the near future without any prospect of a successor, I can’t talk about the future.” [Male, 60s]
8. “As I was born in a white-collar worker, nuclear family in a big city and married into my husband’s family, I don’t have any sense of senzo or ancestral farmland. Maybe someday I will have this sense if I continue to cultivate our land to realize the efforts that our senzo have made to keep it rich and fertile …” [Female, 30s]

2.3 Epiphany

So far, we have seen the words used to reaffirm the values of farming and rural life. We now turn to our next research question: the relationship between those values and the interviewees’ life experiences. The key term we use in response to this question is epiphany.

“Epiphany” was the term proposed by Norman Denzin to refer to a “moment of problematic experience that illuminates personal character and often signifies a turning point in a person’s life” (Denzin, 2001, p.158). In the interviews, we asked, “Have you ever experienced any turning point in your life that affected your sense of values on farming or rural life?” Most people answered yes, and what is more surprising, about 40 % of the experiences (12 cases) can be classified as an “epiphany” in the above-mentioned sense. In Box 5, we present an instance of an epiphany by a male farmer in his 40s.
Box 5: An Epiphanic Experience of a Male Farmer

- He was born into a part-time farming family. After graduating from high school, he took a job with a sales company.
- He made a career as a salesman, but serious trouble in the workplace brought him great stress. He came down with a serious illness.
- While on sick leave, he reflected on his past life and decided to quit the company and the competitive business life at the age of 38. He turned to farming on his own family farm, which his elderly father was struggling to run alone.
- He made every effort to expand the farm to grow crops of rice and soba [buckwheat] with reduced amounts of agricultural chemicals. He wanted to sell directly to urban consumers and developed his own network of steady customers.
- Through farming and sales, he has realized the meaningfulness of farming for himself and the value of agriculture for society. He also developed a perception of himself as hyakusho, as shown in No.4 of Box 2.

The interviewees’ epiphanic experiences can be subcategorized into the following four types.

1. Illness and loss: suffering from serious illness of one’s own or family members and/or the loss of family members
2. Identity crisis: the loss or uncertainty of one’s sense of identity, typically due to maladjustments to the new occupation
3. Trouble in the workplace: trouble and/or distresses in the workplace outside of farming
4. Other: for example, arguments and distress in family relations

The interviewees unanimously expressed that going through these personally difficult, problematic experiences forced them to reconsider their work, way of life, and sense of values. Then, they turned to farming to discover new merits and values in agriculture and rural life. They also unanimously indicated that farming has the unique characteristic of growing living things and taking them for human food as the blessings of nature, and that this characteristic was a major reason for their being drawn to agriculture.

We can demonstrate these processes of renewing values by analyzing epiphanic experiences as in Figure 1.

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6 In addition to our cases, it is notable that Mr. and Mrs. Yamazaki, the leading farmers with high aims in Fukui, also talked about their epiphanic experiences of identity crisis and workplace troubles in the interview conducted by Kishi (2009, pp.170–201). Going through the epiphanies led them to turn to agriculture and the countryside, and the practices of farming and rural life seem to have guided them toward deeper reflections.
3. Summary and Concluding Remarks

In this section, we present a summary and make a few concluding remarks.

In the interviewees’ narratives, we found old words with new meanings to reaffirm the values of farming and rural life. *Hyakusho*, which once had negative meanings, has come to take on various positive meanings to show the farmers’ pride in their work, way of life, and self-image. *Senzo*, which has been the key to the traditional Japanese family system and worship, is still important for the interviewees in thinking about their farmlands and their succession. At the same time, we found that *senzo* transcended the conventional usage to refer to the forerunners of a community beyond each household and blood relations. It seems to imply a sense of common ownership over generations.

Regarding the relationship between the sense of values accompanying these words and the interviewees’ life experiences, we found that more than a few of the interviewees had been through epiphanies and personally difficult, problematic experiences and that these experiences had urged them to reconsider their work, ways of life, and sense of values. Thereafter, they turned to farming to discover new merits and values in agriculture and rural life. They talked about their values using the old words with new meanings.

*Figure 2* shows that the three factors mentioned above, that is, valuating *hyakusho*, valuating *senzo*, and epiphanic experiences, overlap with each other. In fact, the actual degree of overlap is wider than that shown in the figure.

Lastly, we would like to emphasize two points as concluding remarks.

First, it is notable that epiphanic experiences acted as important triggers for reaffirming the values of farming and rural life among the interviewees. Social crises in agriculture and rural society may be the conditions needed for rural people to reflect on meaning and values, and these crises may combine with personal troubles to bring deeper reflections and convictions, as we saw in these cases.

Second, in the reaffirmed values of agriculture and rural life, we can see the persistence of the traditional or conventional factors on the one hand. On the other hand, some reform or innovation in values has surely taken place in accordance with the changes in farming and family life.
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Figure 2: Overlapping of Hyakusho, Senzo & Epiphany

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References


