JAPANESE 農民 FARMERS

by William W. Kelly

One of the several split images we Americans have of Japan is that of city-Japan, country-Japan. Millions of zealous factory and office workers are packed into sprawling cities, while beyond them lie fields of glistening rice, diligently tended by declining numbers of aging farmers. Appreciating such contrasts, many Americans also feel that city and country in Japan have one thing in common: the vigilant protection of the state. Even as it promotes efficient industrial corporations in the international marketplace, the paternal Japanese state shields the highly inefficient farmers from the challenges of the same global market.

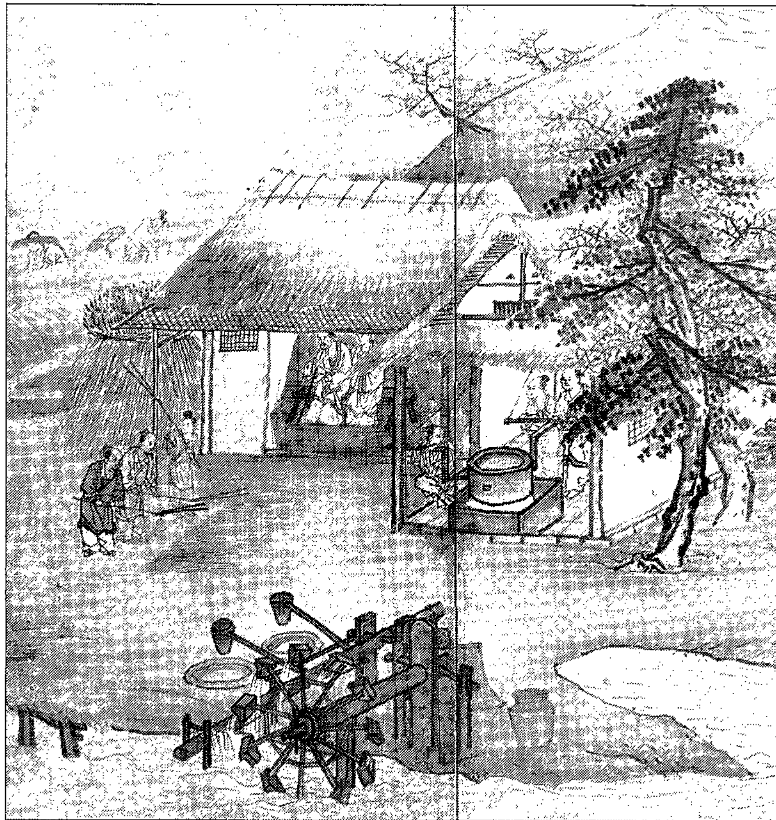
Indeed, for over a decade, the principal irritant in U.S.-Japanese economic relations has been Japan's protection of agriculture, particularly its lavish support of rice farmers. Throughout the postwar decades, the government has guaranteed the purchase of all rice produced in the country. Operating through the national agricultural cooperative network, it sets a price that guarantees a profit to farmers. The rice is then marketed to consumers at a somewhat lower price, which is nonetheless many times the world market price. This gap has produced major government deficits and growing reserves of rice. Meanwhile, the average Japanese's appetite for rice has declined from about six bowls per day in the mid-1960s to about three bowls per day in the late '80s.

The trade friction arises from the repeated and thus far unsuccessful efforts of U.S. rice millers to gain access to the closed Japanese markets. Farmers in the United States and the European Community also enjoy generous government subvention and so are not immune from criticism. But the Japanese case, many Americans feel, is egregious. Current efforts by Japan to limit rice acreage and reduce its price subsidies are judged woefully inadequate. Undersized and overmechanized, the Japanese farms still produce huge surpluses of extremely expensive rice. They are further encouraged to hold on to their plots by laws that prevent consolidation and by a tax code that greatly undertaxes farmland and discourages its conversion to badly needed residential land. Not only would imports of their cheap rice benefit the beleaguered urban consumer, the American millers argue, but the collapse of price supports and reform of the land tax would encourage farmers to sell some of their land. This would drive down astronomical land prices in and around the cities and help many young urban couples to realize the now-impossible dream of home ownership.

What stands in the way of this market sanity? Ardent defenders of the status quo claim that the obstacle is cultural. Rice is central to Japanese values and Japanese lifeways, and the destruction of Japan's rice

farming would mean the loss of its national identity. The emperor transplanting seedlings each spring in his ceremonial plot within the Tokyo palace grounds is a perennial photo-opportunity for the media. But there is also a skeptical view. According to many critics, the real obstacle is crass politics—namely, the special relationship between the farmers and the governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). For 35 years, they argue, the LDP has traded expensive rice prices for the farm vote, vastly overrepresented by postwar districts that have never been redrawn to reflect rural-to-urban migration.

To an American anthropologist with a number of years of experience in rural Japan, both apologists and skeptics seem long on polemics and short on understanding. Their central character, the rice farmer, is generally a stock figure drawn to convenience. And while there is some truth to what the polemicists say about the role of rice both in culture and in domestic politics, the truth is more complicated than they would suggest.



A scene of village life, in ink and colors, attributed to Kusumi Morikage (c. 1620–90), an artist from Kaga in northern Japan.

It is certainly easy for any visitor to Japan to elicit a litany of banalities about rice, monsoon society, and Japanese national taste—about rice as the sustenance of the Japanese soul. And it is certainly true that for 2,000 years, wet-rice has been the mainstay of Japanese farming. However, this is not because of Japan's environment; in fact, in much of the country neither topography nor climate naturally favors rice. Nor is there anything special about the Japanese constitution that makes rice the national staple, despite an argument made several years ago by the Japanese agricultural minister in his effort to discourage Australian beef imports. (He maintained that the intestines of the Japanese were shorter than those of Westerners and therefore ill-suited to digesting beef and other staples of the Western diet.)

Political will, rather than geography or physiology, has put rice at the center of Jap-

anese society. The rice paddy is an efficient, albeit labor-intensive, calorie machine. Rice also transports and stores well. For these and other reasons, political elites have for centuries promoted rice cultivation through their tax demands and their allocations of prestige. In the early modern Tokugawa period, for example, taxes for all crops and even for fishing and forest products were calculated and levied in rice. The relative social status of the 250 domain lords was determined by the official rice yields of their lands. Thus postwar agricultural policies promoting rice monoculture reflect a longstanding elite bias. But this bias has always gone against rural wisdom. The cultivators themselves have usually preferred a more diversified agriculture, with rice as only one part of a broader regime of crops and animals.

In fact, the cultural significance of rice to most middle-aged and older people in rural Japan lies elsewhere. Rice for them evokes both pain and pride in their personal memories of the 1930s and '40s, the 15 years of the Pacific War and the American occupation in its aftermath. Their memories are of the often-severe food shortages during those 20 years, the requisitions of farm horses and cooking-pots, the drafting of all able-bodied men, and the farming burdens borne by the women and elderly who were left behind. To have survived, to have kept the paddies producing, has created a tenacious will and a healthy skepticism about their present good fortune. To this day, most Japanese will never leave a single grain of rice in their bowls.

The occupation's land reform had an equally powerful impact, transforming a countryside of tenants into one of proprietors. In effect, the farmers' life work was enfranchised, and very few Westerners recognize the extent to which this has set farming apart from other postwar occupations. Simply put, most of the latter have been effectively depoliticized. Shorn of fascist patriotism, the incentives of public service and corporate employment are now economic growth, job security, and organizational loyalty. Even the Confucian familial metaphor of the workplace has been pruned of its imperial aspects. The farmer, however, stands as a striking exception. Agricultural work was, in subtle but enduring ways, politicized. The land-reform program itself linked it prominently to democratic principles; the associated Agricultural Cooperative Law of 1947 emphasized a democratic association of independent smallholders; and political party reorganization linked it to a party machine, the LDP. Even if the realities have changed, these associations remain strong, and they explain much of the farmer's reluctance to yield his identity.

By its voting habits, the rural population shows its appreciation of the government's agricultural munificence. Indeed, this symbiosis is the basis of critics' charges that collusion between farmers and politicians has perpetuated a system of subsidized inefficiency. However, the size and power of this voting bloc is exaggerated, as census figures show. In 1950, one in three Japanese households was a "farm family,"* but that proportion dropped rapidly in the 1960s,

*The Japanese term, "farm family" *(nōka)*, is the linguistic reverse of our "family farm." Census figures attempt to distinguish between full-time farm families, those part-time farm families whose farm income exceeds their nonfarm income, and those part-time farm families whose nonfarm income exceeds their farm income.

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and by 1985 it had fallen to one in eight. Moreover, in 1985, only 610,000 of the 4,300,000 farm families were full-time—which is to say, 1.6 percent of all Japanese households. These numbers hardly indicate a potent voting bloc.

Karel van Wolferen comes closer to the mark in *The Enigma of Japanese Power* (1989). He observes that the real power lies in the national federation of agricultural cooperatives, the Zenkoku Nōkyō Chūkai, or Zenchū. This federation handles most of the rice marketing, and retails farm and consumer products to its members—virtually all 4.3 million farm households. Through its associated banking network, it provides credit, insurance, and other services to its membership. Indeed, it is by far the largest insurance company in the world. Zenchū is thus a powerful voting machine and lobbying organization. Whatever ambivalence ordinary farmers may feel about agricultural policies, Zenchū's very existence depends on the government's rice programs. For its own survival, van Wolferen argues, Zenchū mobilizes and rewards a large "tribe" of LDP politicians.

But even this view of rural support for the LDP is too cynical. The party's support outside the major cities is much more broadly based and has to do more with public works than with rice prices. Since at least the late 1960s, agricultural mechanization and improvement programs have provided the opportunity for a far wider modernization of regional infrastructure. Directly and indirectly, 25 years of farm aid have permitted a vast program of public works construction: roads, railroads, communications, schools, medical clinics, town offices, and a host of other public facilities.

While it was not their architects' intent, postwar agricultural policies have contributed to a major redistribution of tax revenues from metropolitan Japan to regional Japan. Tokyo remains the political, market, media, and educational capital of Japan. It attracts—perhaps one should say compels—the best and brightest from all prefectures. However, by a number of indicators—house ownership, car ownership, air quality, per household disposable income, per capita domestic space—rural regions offer better living conditions than do urban areas. The LDP's electoral success and political action derive less from what the LDP has done for Japan's farmers than from what it has done for Japan's regions.

It is not, then, a special Japanese affinity for rice or the LDP's embrace of the farmer that has perpetuated the peculiar pattern of postwar farming. Cultural memory and political calculations are at work in different ways. Yet even this overstates both the distinctiveness and importance of rice in rural Japan. It also overlooks the richer texture of regional lifeways. For the last 15 years, I have been returning periodically to the northern coastal plain of Shōnai, one of the few areas where large-scale rice farming remains viable. For the Itōs, one of the families with whom I live during my Shōnai visits, rice farming is still central, but a short profile of their lives and circumstances may serve to illustrate the new shape of the changing countryside.

農民　　農民

The Itōs have lived for five generations in the 100-family settlement of Watamae, now part of Fujishima Town in the fertile center of Shōnai Plain. Fujishima lies between Shōnai's two rival cities—the old castle town of Tsuruoka, nestled at the southern edge of the plain, and the commercial port of Sakata, an important harbor in the pre-modern sea trade.

Administratively, Fujishima is a small town center surrounded by 3,500 hectares of rice paddyland and about 50 nucleated villages like Watamae. Some 5,000 persons live in the town center, and another 8,500 in the perimeter villages.

In the early 1980s, a fad for renaming swept through the Japanese corporate world. (Americans experienced this as the replacement of the Datsun name with Nissan.) Municipalities across the country joined this "CI (for corporate image) boom" in a rush to gain a slight public-relations advantage over neighboring towns. Fujishima adopted the slogan "Home of Rice and the Lion Dance," an ironic choice considering that both rice-growing and the traditional ritual Lion Dance are greatly endangered even in this rice bowl. Shōnai-mai, or Shōnai rice, is one of Japan's favorite brands, and 1,500 of Fujishima's 2,800 households still identify themselves as *nōka*, or farm families. However, only 110 of these claim to be full-time farm families. Residents prefer to softpedal the fact that since the mid-1980s the largest contributor to the town's economy has been a factory belonging to a Tokyo-based electrical parts corporation. Some 15 years ago, the company bought up rice fields on the edge of Watamae village and has since been gradually expanding the plant. The total output of the plant's 800 employees now exceeds the total value of Fujishima's rice production. What was rural Japan 40 years ago is now more properly regional Japan.

The Itōs are one of those few full-time farm families. Their three-generation household includes an older couple, their son Noboru, his wife Keiko, and the young couple's three school-aged children. Noboru is himself the oldest of three siblings. He was born in 1949, a member of Japan's baby-boom generation. His birth coincided with the postwar land reform that gave his grandfather clear title to the two hectares of rice paddy the household had tenanted. Noboru's grandfather and his parents farmed this land through the 1950s and early 1960s, while encouraging the three children to finish high school.

Thanks to mechanization, the rice farmers of modern Japan produce more rice than the nation can consume. Government protection and subsidies help keep the highly venerated farmers in business.

Noboru's younger brother, Shōji, born in 1950, graduated from the regional technical high school and went to work in a Yokohama auto-parts factory. After a series of machine-shop jobs in the Tokyo area, he

settled into long-term employment with a small pollution control company in Yokohama. He now lives in a public rental apartment with his wife, who works part-time, and their two middle-school children. Like most renters in metropolitan Tokyo, they have all but given up hope of buying a home, although they still enter the periodic lotteries for state-subsidized housing.

Noboru's sister, Yumiko, was born in 1953, and graduated from Shōnai's commercial high school. She left immediately for Tokyo to find work as a buyer for a Tokyo department store. In 1982, after an elaborate Tokyo marriage, she joined her husband in his family's small clothing business. Together they purchased a modest condominium in eastern Tokyo and had a child. In the mid-1980s, however, the business went bankrupt and the couple moved into a small apartment with Yumiko's mother-in-law (who cares for their child during the day). The couple now manages a small pet shop and plan one day to open their own.

Noboru's own decision in the 1960s to go to the agricultural high school was a difficult one, but he has stuck with farming long after most other young men of the settlement have given up. With a full complement of machines, Noboru now handles four hectares of paddyland by himself, an acreage that would have required at least four adults of his parents' generation. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, he had to work half of the year making deliveries for a city bookstore, but he was always trying to come up with ways to make a living by year-round agriculture in a northern climate whose snowy winters allow only a single rice crop. After several experiments, he hit upon a scheme for growing and pickling organic vegetables. Bypassing the agricultural cooperative, he joined with two acquaintances from nearby villages to negotiate a long-term contract with a Tokyo-area consumer cooperative. For his business, Noboru seasonally hires several older men and women of the village, including his mother.

Noboru and Keiko, a year younger, were married in 1973, after introductions through mutual friends of their parents and a very brief courtship. She agreed to the marriage on the condition that she be able to continue as a full-time salesperson at what was then the only department store on the plain. The Itōs readily accepted. Machines made her labor unnecessary, and her job brought the household a regular cash income. Today, with much of Noboru's farm income going directly to the household account at the Agricultural Coop, Keiko's is the largest cash contribution to the family budget.

After nearly 20 years with the department store, she remains on the sales floor. She was offered advancement to the managerial staff but declined because it would have required taking assignments away from the region. Now heading one of the floor sales units, she is required to work ten, sometimes 12, hours a day, and often more hours at home scheduling her unit's overtime.

Both of Noboru's parents (Grandpa Tokuzō and Grandma Fusae) turn 60 this year. They are members of the "Shōwa single-digit generation", as those born in the first part of Emperor Shōwa's era (1926–1934) are called. This is Japan's equivalent of what sociologist Glen Elder has called our "Children of the Depression," and in the Japanese imagination, it embodies the spirit of postwar Japan—committed, hardworking, both proud and wary of the affluence it has produced. The two older Itōs finished elementary school and worked as adolescent field hands during the war years. Grandma's fondest childhood memory, which she retells over and over, is of receiving the certificate of perfect fourth-

grade attendance, earned despite the long walk to school from her upland home. Mutual in-laws brokered their young marriage just after the war ended, and Grandma entered her husband's household as bride, daughter-in-law, and older sister to several of her husband's six siblings who were still in school and at home.

Grandpa Tokuzō never was enthusiastic about farming—he had a bad back and weak stomach—and his wife still complains that he left much of the field work to her and his father. As soon as Noboru's marriage was arranged and he seemed set on farming, Grandpa turned to his real passion, which is dedication to local "good causes", particularly school programs and senior-citizen activities. In 1990, he finishes his fourth four-year term as a Fujishima town councilman. Such longevity is a considerable achievement, especially because he has consistently refused to engage in the usual practice of vote-buying. He is an indefatigable and thus widely liked small-town politician.

His family, it must be said, is more ambivalent about his public activities. They appreciate the status such involvement brings, but Grandma still suspects her husband is malingering, and the younger Itōs see his generosity as a drain on family finances. More seriously, it has meant delaying for a decade or so their hopes of substantially remodeling their house. Twenty years ago, they were among the first to modernize and enlarge their thatched-roof farm house, but now Noboru and Keiko look enviously at the more contemporary living arrangements and amenities in their neighbors' homes. Not surprisingly, they were delighted when Grandpa announced his decision to retire in the fall of 1990.

In the years since her own contributions to the paddy fields became unnecessary, Noboru's mother Fusae has risen most mornings at five o'clock to earn a bit of money doing piece work at home. For several years, she did small-wire soldering for the electric parts company; recently she has been doing finish work for girls' clothing at 200 yen per piece. At 6:30, she stretches her sore back with the radio exercise program, and then she and Keiko prepare breakfast. While the children are at school, she tends the family's large vegetable garden and continues her piece work. Grandma Fusae has been generally happy to assume much of the burden of raising her three grandchildren. As a young bride, she had to return to the fields immediately after giving birth to her own three children, who were looked after by her mother-in-law. So now she enjoys this long-delayed chance to be a mother.

Keiko and Noboru's three children all moved up the educational ladder this year. The oldest, a daughter, passed a highly competitive exam to enter Tsuruoka South, the region's preeminent high school; the second, a son and putative household successor, entered Fujishima's junior high school, while the youngest, a second son, began elementary school in Watamae. (Regional public works programs have rebuilt all three schools within the last five years.)

The Itōs' present educational concerns focus on the older two. Unlike the graduates of other Shōnai high schools, those of Tsuruoka South are expected to go on to college, but Shōnai's best school is still far from the top of the national pyramid. Personal ambitions and adult expectations push the students to achievement that even Tsuruoka South's regular, fast-paced curriculum cannot prepare them for. This year, fully 120 of the 220 graduating seniors chose to take an extra year for intensive exam preparation, either by themselves (as so-called rōnin) or at special academies. As high-school graduates, Keiko and Noboru improved upon their parents' elementary education, and they would be proud—

though also saddened—to see their daughter earn a college degree. While the diploma will be a great honor, it will almost certainly lead to their daughter's leaving the region for work or marriage.

This heightens their anxieties about their older son. Given the three-year junior high system, they have 18 months before they must decide which high school entrance exam he will sit for. Is there a future in the family's farming? Is he interested? Should he be encouraged? Noboru has a new-found enthusiasm for farming and the experience to develop a farming business partially independent of the cooperative network. This still does not give him the confidence to imagine a long-term future for Fujishima agriculture. Like virtually every other parent in Watamae, he will probably urge his son to consider other work.

For the moment, though, rice, and rice farming, remain central to the fortunes and feelings of the Itōs. There are many ways in which Noboru's life has diverged from that of his younger brother and sister in metropolitan Tokyo. However, even to members of this "full-time" farming household, the satisfactions and concerns of daily life are far more broadly defined by their place in regional, not rural, Japan. Grandpa Tokuzō's local good works, Grandma Fusae's efforts to keep working, Keiko's current overtime pressures, the children's educational choices, the plans for remodeling the house—all are conditioned by, and expressed in, the terms of mainstream Japanese life. This is true even for Noboru's farming and food processing. For economic advantage and ideological satisfaction, his personal occupation remains the family's image. His case demonstrates, however, the anachronism of the notion of a full-time farm family, even for those few who still claim such an identity.

It would be a mistake to conclude from the Itō's lifeways that there is no future for farming in rural Japan. Farmers like Noboru now believe that national overproduction and international demands for rice imports make eventual liberalization of the rice market inevitable. With that will come the collapse of rice-based policies and rice-centered farming. To these farmers, however, the issue is not the stark opposition of cultural sentimentalism or economic rationality posed by urban commentators and foreign critics. The farmers recognize that in postwar Japan, agriculture has been a catalyst in regional development, while rice has carried a heavy symbolic load in defining that agriculture. "Home of Rice and the Lion Dance" is as effective—and misleading—a tug on urban heart-strings as were American news reports of bankruptcy auctions of family farms in the Midwest. The future the farmers now expect only heightens the contradiction they must resolve. If any farming is to remain viable in regional Japan, rice will have to be much less important economically, even while continuing to enjoy cultural preeminence. Both the profits and prestige that farmers need to survive will depend on their ability to manage this paradox.