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Like a Bonsai Tree: Models of Food Production and Nature in the Northern Kanto Plain of Japan

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Introduction

While the Japanese islands have been prone to a variety of natural disasters throughout their history, the magnitudes of some of these omnipresent threats are observed to have increased in recent years. My informants, for example, anecdotally spoke of perceived increase in the temperature throughout the years. The relatively cool rainy season which lasted from the middle of June into July, which used to require heating equipment, turned into “wet summers.” They also talked about orange trees they planted that used to produce sour flavors now yielded sweeter flavors presumably due to the warmer climate.

Relatedly, storms of many kinds are reported to have intensified in recent years. In the past, the term tornados were unheard of, but today they are new and frequent occurrences. Other severe storms are accompanied by larger hails than in the past. In fact, in the winter of 2014, the year this fieldwork took place, the eastern Japan, including Tokyo, experienced record-breaking snowfalls. As a result, many of the informants’ green houses were destroyed.

Yet the informants appeared composed and nonchalant about the effects of these changing climates on their food production. Most of them did not bring up the topic during the interviews until they were asked specifically about it. What could be some of the reasons for this? For one, the general increase in temperature and the intensity of the rain and snowfall has not significantly affected the informants’ “outdoor crops,” which are predominantly rice and wheat. The majority of other products, mainly vegetables, are produced indoor. The destruction of the green houses due to the record amount (over two feet) of snow was a major loss. Nonetheless, the informants seemed to have accepted the incidence as a by-gone, and showed a sense of gratitude toward the Japanese government, which helped cover about ninety percent of the loss. Such is a reminiscent of the way the people of northern Japan reacted calmly to the calamity of the *tsumani* in 2011 (Kingston, 2012).

What implications do these preliminary observations offer in terms of “cultural models” of nature that are purported to have influenced the informants’ narratives about food production? I hypothesize that the informants relied on an overarching cultural model that nature can be “humanized” to enhance human endeavors particularly in the areas of self-cultivation and associated interpersonal relationships. Using this cultural model works as a buffer against and around which to circumvent the perceived and real harms of raw, untamed nature. According to this cultural model, raw nature is *un-natural*. Nature is “natural” only when it is humanized to enhance human existence and activities (Pelzel, 1974; Lebra, 1976).

Research Site

The data was collected in Gunma Prefecture (first map, highlighted in red), which is in the northwestern tip of Kanto Plain (second map)—the largest flat land in

Japan spreading southeastward toward the Pacific Ocean. The southern section of Kanto Plain includes the Greater Tokyo Metropolis, the largest urbanized and industrialized region of the nation. Gunma's climate, location and landscape make it an ideal place to produce many types of agricultural products (Shimizu, 2012).

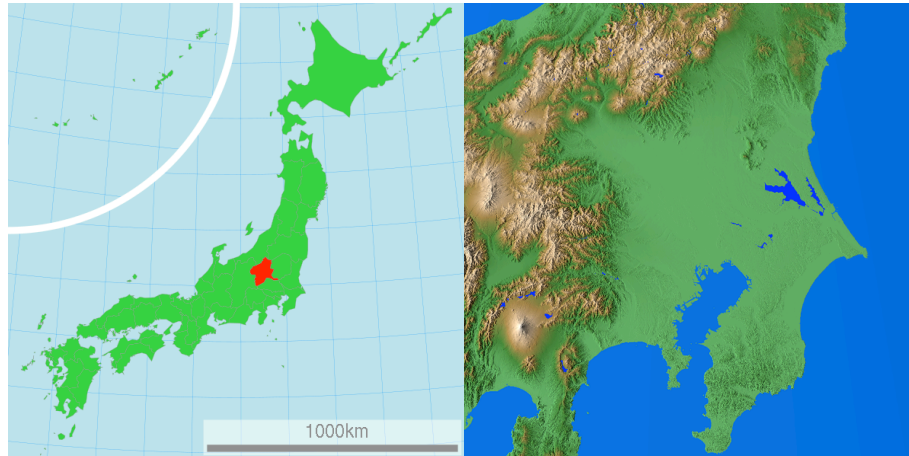


Figure 1. Gunma Prefecture (highlighted in red left)

Gunma's topsoil consists of volcanic ashes that accumulated over the centuries. The mountain range on the north blocks the moisture traveling from the Sea of Japan, creating much precipitations—in the form of rain in the summer and snow in the winter—on the “back” (northern) side, giving Gunma the most sunny days per year in the nation. Gunma also has varying levels of altitude generated by the mountain range gradually tapering down to the Kanto Plain. This allows the food producers to alter the growing temperatures by switching the altitude on which the crops are grown. When combined, the fertile volcanic soil with rich minerals, the temperate climate, and the terrace-like farming fields produce nearly ideal condition for producing a variety of agricultural products. As one informant said, Gunma is a “farmer's heaven” where “you can produce many different kind of products within very little proximity.”

Participants

The participants come from two of the most populous cities in the prefecture: Takasaki and Maebashi which annex to each other and are centrally located in the prefecture. I asked two of my high school friends (I am a native of Takasaki) and my mother to recruit farmers they knew. After obtaining a few leads, I used snowball sampling method. I had a total of eighteen participants. The sample was skewed toward older males with high school education (i.e., the modal pattern): 13 males and 5 females; ages 29 to 66 with the mean of 55 (11 out of 18 reported). Of the 8 out of 18 who reported their educational backgrounds, one had a four-year college degree, one had a junior high degree, and the rest (6) had high school degrees.

About half of the participants produced rice and wheat (collectively referred to as *bei baku*, i.e., rice and wheat). All of the rice and wheat farmers grew a variety of other vegetables (e.g., cucumbers, lettuce, tomatoes, *daikon*, etc.) because rice and wheat required relatively little care in between the planting and harvesting seasons.

The remaining half produced specialized products which included plums, pears, tomatoes and pigs. One specialized in farming a variety of organic vegetables.

Methods

The fieldwork took place during a four-week period between May 21 and June 18, 2014. The methods included: nature walk with open interviews, semi-structured interviews, free-listing tasks, and space tasks (the analysis of the last two data are in progress and not included). All four processes were videotaped, and the semi-structured interviews were transcribed by native Japanese speakers in the field. Below, I will first outline what the participants saw as factors leading to successful food productions based on the results from the semi-structured interviews. Then I will speculate about the cultural models of nature on which these responses may be based. Finally, I will formulate working hypothesis to be tested in future studies.

Factors Leading to Successful Farming

Since Japan is a highly industrialized society with complex economic systems, none of the informants engaged in subsistence farming. As such, their farming did not rely directly or solely on naturally given soil conditions or weather patterns. Instead, they utilized advanced in-door food productions facilities and technologies. They also took advantage of the wealth of current, and research-based farming knowledge provided by the municipal and national farmers organizations such as JA, Japan Agricultural Cooperatives. They also exchanged ideas and tips with other farmers, which they acquired through experience or the sources mentioned above.

As to what makes plants and animals grow, informants shared basic knowledge which they saw as fundamental to successful farming: i.e., knowledge about optimal soil conditions (via appropriate fertilizers for plants and foods for animals), lights, winds, temperatures, timing of planning and harvesting and other maintenance activities (e.g., pruning), and ways to prevent diseases. They said that such knowledge comes from experiences, from other farmers including their parents and family members, and from the government-based, local and national farming bureaus such as JA. No one mentioned supernatural factors such as “gods” or “spirits” as factors contributing to the growth.

In terms of their commercial success, informants revealed two distinctive yet complementary models. The first model may be called ‘rational and profit-oriented.’ Here the food producers worked in concert with the information provided by JA about the crops and seeds types, kinds of diseases that are prevalent and how to prevent them to maximize their productivity. The JA’s also organized chains of marketing outlets into which the farmers could distribute their product at a timely fashion. Most of the large-scale rice, wheat, tomatoes, plums and pears farmers relied on such support system.

The second model may be termed ‘non-rational and relational,’ and even ‘moral’ and ‘spiritual,’ in a sense that it seeks higher level of meaning and satisfactions from farming than merely profiting from it. Informants often used the terms *kodawari* (to be particular about being unique, authentic and/or perfect in one’s pursuit) and

tsunagari (to be authentically connected with others) to express this view. To *kodawaru* (the verb form of *kodawari*) means to produce foods that bear one's 'signature' heart/effort. Many of the consumers who tasted such foods become 'repeaters,' loyal customers who develop a special and lasting tie to the food producers. Many farmers noted that they gain most satisfactions out of their job from such special relationships. In short, the first model is essential because without it, farmers cannot sustain their livelihood. The second model complements the first as it helps them to create deeper and more personalized meaning out of their work. Below are some examples of the second perspective from the semi-structured interviews and the nature walks.

Individual Cases

Michiko Sekiguchi, a sixty-four year old woman, married into a multi-generational farming family. While her husband takes charge of the rice and wheat, which supports family's main income, she grows greenhouse tomatoes, along with a variety of other green vegetables. She says her operation is "small and not profitable," but had continued it for the last eighteen years. Asked why, she responded, "It's [my] *kodawari*."

Asked to explain what *kodawari* means to non-Japanese, she said, "it means to be particular [about your mission] and not to compromise (*kotte iru*)."¹ In a practical term, "it means to...wake up at three or four in the morning every day" to take her vegetables to the local stores. "That way, people say when they eat my vegetables, *oishii!* (delicious). I pick them first thing in the morning and have people eat that way. I especially want young children to know how great they taste."

Another expression of Michiko's *kodawari*, in addition to always hand delivering her vegetables fresh, is the farm stand she created for herself, which she named, *Daichi No Megumi* (The Earth's/Land's Blessing/Abundance), which happens to be the brand name given to the rice they produce. The space is filled with wall hangings and gifts she received from her (female) friends. Many of them contain words of appreciation for the relationships they cultivated over the years. Secondarily, she sells the vegetables she produced at low prices. She said that the room symbolizes her connection with other female farmers.

It is also worth noting that this farm stand is located next to the family grave. Michiko is grateful that she and her husband inherited the land from their (the husband's) ancestor. She says, "I know how our ancestors were attached to this land, so I would never let it go. When I think of their feelings, I, too, cannot let go of this land." During our 'nature walk' around the family grave, she said, "this [having the grave next to their farm] is a reminder that our ancestors are always watching over for us."

Shinji Amada is a thirty-two year old pig farmer who also took over the business from his father, who inherited it from his father forty years ago. As a third generation entrepreneur, Shinji strives to create a brand that is unique to him. He said that such goal is a norm in the Japanese big farming business, which contrasts with the quantity over quality emphasis of the Western—i.e., U.S. and Denmark—farmers.

“Japanese pig farmers seek ‘artistry’ in their work. They put their ‘soul’ into their products so they naturally become expensive. In the United States and Denmark, they produce one ‘national’ brand. But here have over four hundreds brands of pork. Each farmer wants to produce ‘something that only [they] can make’ (*jinbun shika dekiani*). It’s our *kodawari*. This is what is so unique about Japanese pig farming.”

As with Michiko, Shinji said he “grow[s] food to make people happy.” He continued: “I don’t even want to make money unless everyone else is happy... I recently read a book that says never lose the sense of gratitude, and that the only way to get that gratitude is through seeing other people rejoice and smile.”

One way to achieve his goal is through the “farm tour” design for school-age children. He wants them to “eye-witness the birth of baby pigs.” He said that the reason for this project is both “philosophical” and “educational.” For him, “to eat means to ‘be given someone else’s life’ (*itadaku*).” He elaborated, “Pigs are like people. They are cute and friendly. To understand that we eat them to be alive is to understand the preciousness of both their and our lives. Hopefully, knowing this creates a sense of gratitude in all of us [to be alive at the expense of pigs’ lives].”

Hikaru Hoshi, age thirty-nine, is another entrepreneur who dropped out of a corporate job in Tokyo to start organic farming in Gunma’s isolated countryside. He grows vegetables free of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. But his *kodawari* is not merely to grow organic food, but “to connect with people...[since] there is still a gap to be filled between the farmers and people who eat what we grow. What the future farmers need to do is to reduce the gap between them.” He visits restaurants and demonstrates how and what to cook with his vegetables: “First, I cook and eat what I grow myself. I try to come up with my own methods of cooking [which I believe makes food taste good]. Then I go to a restaurant, get inside the kitchen and demonstrate what they could do [with my vegetables]. Sometimes I [go out of the kitchen and] converse with customers. I am a ‘talking farmer.’”

In short, all four informants above try to create human connection through the foods they produce. As discussed below, this central preoccupation, or *kadawari*, may have to do with an assumption that un-humanized nature is not ‘natural.’

Nature and Food Production

The Japanese word for nature, *shizen* (自然), has two basic meanings: to be ‘natural’—i.e., to be ‘spontaneously or naturally so’ (Tucker, 2003, p. 161)—and that which pertains to the natural world—the environment and creatures in it (Tucker, 2003; Shimizu, 2012). Accordingly, I attempt to generate some hypothesis about what constitute ‘natural’ (Meaning 1) ways to produce foods via ‘nature’ (Meaning 2).

Using both meaning, I propose a cultural model which states, ‘nature’ is not ‘natural’ until it is ‘humanized.’ An analogy here may be that of tending a *bonsai* tree, the art of producing miniature trees that ‘mimic’ the way they ‘naturally’ grow. This view contrasts with the two other alternative views, that nature is ‘below’ human to be used as *the means to* achieve utilitarian gain, or ‘above’ them in that it is too powerful and beyond human control (e.g., natural disasters).

Takie Lebra (1976), a Japanese-born cultural anthropologist, citing Pelzel (1974), describes this “humanization” of nature (the middle position above) as follows: “Humanism, Japanese style...[is where] all elements of the universe be *related horizontally and mutually* (italics added), that they share the same ‘human’ status, rather than being hierarchically controlled with the ultimate keeper of the order at the top” (p. 10). Hereby the “task of [humans] was to make nature civil, removing from it the troublesome qualities of speech, mobility and violence” (Pelzel, 1970, p. 47, quoted in Lebra, 1976, p. 11).

Below are some examples from this study that seem to support this cultural model. As Mr. Hoshi and I drove away from his organic farm after the Nature Walk, he muttered: “Being out there (where his field is) late in the evening, I hear wild animals begin to make noises. At a time like that, I feel that there is a ‘natural’ (i.e. untamed) world out there that is beyond human affairs. I feel that I need to leave there to give it respect.”

Another evidence comes from, Mr. Terada, Mr. Hoshi’s business partner, whose job is to create close producer-consumer relationships mentioned earlier by Mr. Hoshi, noted that there was a stigma attached to “strict organic farming... People tend to see organic farmers as religious fanatics of sorts... It’s a perception unique to Japan... Organic farmers are seen as being too ‘stoic’ (*suto ikku*), and not in sync with the sentiment of the rest of people.” This “sentiment,” as I interpreted, suggests a belief that food production and consumption must be a two-way, mutually interdependent process between the food producers and the consumers. To produce foods by an abstract principle of the food producer alone, i.e., growing foods devoid of chemicals, is a less ‘natural’ way to produce and consume foods (raw nature) than that which is embedded in the close, interdependent relationships between the food producers and their consumers.

Summary

The initial phase of this project attempted to discover cultural models of nature underlying discourses of food production in central Japan. The results show a pattern calling for *human intervention* for successful farming. Furthermore, the need for human intervention appears to be underscored by a cultural model that raw nature must be ‘humanized’ on relational terms to be cognizant in the local context. To verify this hypothesis, however, it needs to be validated further by methods such as key words frequency analysis, causal analysis and metaphor analysis (See D’Andrade, 2005 and Quinn, 2005, for example).

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