Becoming a farmer in contemporary Japan

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Thesis abstract

This thesis explores the rise of pro-rural migration and the possibilities of agricultural modes of livelihood in Japan. The question driving this research was why, despite the growing trend of new entry in agriculture since the mid-2010s, half of new farmers from a non-farming background fail to secure sufficient income to live on from their activity five years into farm management. Based on twelve months fieldwork in eastern Nagano prefecture and Kyoto city, and on participant observation conducted for eight months in an agricultural cooperative, this study investigates the four key hurdles faced by agricultural new entrants in the establishment of a farming business: the acquisition of land and housing, farming know-how, capital, and market outlets. New farmers look with fresh eyes at agricultural issues, and their experiences provide a vantage point over the institutions shaping rural and agricultural life. This thesis documents the mounting problem of land and house abandonment in regional Japan, showing how norms and institutions shape the bundle of rights surrounding property and how this reflects on rural communities' revitalisation. This study also challenges the widespread view in the English literature explaining Japanese agriculture's decline as being largely due to institutional inertia and entrenched vested interests. Ethnographic material documents the larger constellation of forces driving the reproduction of Japan's agrarian structure, while also providing a more comprehensive account of agricultural cooperatives and JA group. To avoid reinforcing Japan's exceptionalism, this study contextualises Japanese agriculture within a broader agri-food framework. Agricultural policy, farming practices, and fresh food distribution are compared with EU countries and Italy in particular, shedding new light on processes of agrarian change and different configurations of food provisioning in capitalist economies. The analysis of fresh food production and distribution, with special attention given to issues of asymmetric market power and price formation in food supply chains, contributes to debates in the anthropology of markets and agrarian political economy.

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Introduction

By the late 1960s, rural depopulation or the 'depopulation problem' (*kaso mondai*) had already assumed a high profile in Japan. Since then, rural regions have continued to suffer from outmigration and population ageing, with many small settlements brought to the verge of demographic extinction. Similar to other countries, the population left behind is increasingly old, often dealing with the decline of public services and facilities (Matanle 2016). Counter to this broader trend, Japan has recently witnessed an increase in the number of young urbanites relocating into rural municipalities (NHK et al. 2015). The phenomenon, dubbed '*den'en kaiki*' or 'return to the country,' generated great media hype and a surprising rebirth of the image of rurality among urban youth, in turn prompting a growing number of people to consider a new life in the countryside (Sōmushō and MLIT 2014; Furusato Kaiki 2019). The growing popularity of rural living was accompanied by an equally unprecedented agricultural revival. Long associated with a negative image of backwardness, agriculture suddenly became 'cool.' Celebrities dressed in farm-themed attire begun to appear on the covers of lifestyle and fashion magazines. For the first time, articles dedicated to agriculture also started to appear on business magazines featuring success stories of young entrepreneurs, cutting edge greenhouses, plant factories, and drones. Applicants to agricultural departments in universities increased, and whether inspired by peasant ideals or by more entrepreneurial models, a growing number of urbanites became farmers (MAFF 2019a).

The rise of pro-rural migration is a most welcome trend for Japan's shrinking regions and for its declining agricultural sector. However, although the network of support and the vast amount of information today available online have tangibly ameliorated the so-called 'three hurdles' of urban to rural migration (community life, housing, and employment) (Odagiri et al. 2016:13), many new settlers struggle to secure livelihoods and desired lifestyles in the countryside. Agriculture appears as an emblematic example. Despite the increase in the number of agricultural entrants from

a non-farming background, statistics show that only half of self-employed new farmers earn sufficient income to live on five years into farm management (NCA 2017:47).

The recent rise of pro-rural migration is the focus of a large body of literature in Japanese documenting initiatives adopted by rural municipalities in the effort to attract newcomers, the motivations and background of urban-rural migrants, difficulties they face fitting into rural communities, and their contribution to revitalisation initiatives. The phenomenon is also the focus of recent ethnographic work in English exploring the changing values of urban youth pursuing more fulfilling lives in the countryside and rural municipalities' efforts in attracting newcomers (Klien 2015, 2020; Rosenberger 2017; Funck 2020; Lewerich 2020; Reiher 2020; Takeda 2020). Because new entry farmers represent a considerable share of pro-rural migrants, and agriculture, despite its low economic significance, remains central to rural life and rural revitalisation, their case appears particularly significant. Previous studies largely focus on successful stories of municipalities attracting new entrants and on new farmers' background and motives, while paying little attention to the specific context in which they come to operate, the opportunities available to them, and the reasons behind their choices.[1] This is also true for much research on new agricultural entrants even beyond Japan. As Wilbur (2013:167) points out, 'whereas the impulses that motivate back-to-the-land migration have guided much of the research on the subject, the everyday practices that enable new farmers to achieve their ambitions have received much less attention.'

Why do so many new entry farmers struggle to make a living from agriculture, a protected industry in Japan? This is especially surprising considering the comprehensive network of support available to them. It is a commonly accepted fact that in market economies the financial rewards of farming tend to be minimal. Agriculture is a competitive industry and strictly agriculture-based modes of livelihood are often unviable for smallholders, who typically rely on off-farm income for

[1] This literature is discussed in Chapter 3. Short studies broadly discussing difficulties faced by new entrants include Aikawa 2017; Egawa 2016a, 2016b; Ogasawara 2016; Ogasawara and Kusano 2013, 2014; Shima 2013a; Shima 2013b; Hashimoto and Hu 2016; Uchiyama 2014. Studies in English exclusively focus on organic farmers and pay little or no attention to their economic and institutional context (Rosenberger 2014, 2017; Kurochkina 2015; McGreevy 2012; Zollet 2018; McGreevy et al. 2019).

their sustenance. As countries industrialise, growing concentration in agriculture is accompanied by the progressive demise of smallholdings and the declining number of people finding sustenance on the land. The process producing social, material, and biophysical conditions that are not conducive to the reproduction of agrarian and land-based livelihoods is broadly referred to in the scholarly literature as deagrarianisation (Hebinick 2018:227).

The effects of modernisation and globalisation on rural people, and in particular peasant farmers, are the focus of a large body of ethnographic literature. Mostly focusing on developing countries, anthropologists have explored the transformation of agrarian societies, emphasising the importance of a 'house model' of the economy encompassing 'frugality and the aspiration to self-sufficiency, even when this was increasingly contradicted by the realities of peasant incorporation into wider systems of markets and state power' (Hann 2018:11). In anthropology as in rural sociology, particularly in the 1970s, a Marxist approach has been often adopted in the study of peasants, conceived as petty commodity producers progressively displaced or converted into capitalist farmers through processes of capital accumulation in the agri-food complex (e.g. Leeds 1977; Scott 1977; Berdichewsky 1979). The differentiation of peasants into the rural proletariat and capitalist farmers has however been challenged by a successive generation of anthropologists exploring how peasants are variously constituted in different times and places (Wolf 1971, 1982, 2001; Cancian 1972, 1989; Kahn 1980; Mintz 1989; Roseberry 1983; in Harris 2005:427). More recently, anthropologists like Kearney (1996) called into question the very notion of the peasantry in a world where the boundaries between rural and urban spheres are increasingly blurred and the rural population combines different sources of income. Costa Rican and Mexican small farmers described by Edelman (1999) and Schüren (2003) are nothing like the contemporary peasants whose disappearance is endlessly predicted. The same is true for family farms in the global north engaging with global networks and international mobility (Woods 2014).

The diversity characterising processes of agrarian change is well exemplified by Japan's case, a fully developed market economy where concentration in agriculture is minimal and the

demise of smallholdings experienced in other industrialised countries throughout the second half of the 20th century only started to intensify in the 1990s (MAFF 2015a; OECD 2009). Japan's post-war model of decentralised industrial development and the burgeoning of public construction works in the 1970s-1980s provided income-supplementing opportunities in rural areas, allowing the survival of smallholdings and the diffusion of part-time farming (Moore 1990; Jussaume 1991). Economic and cultural disincentives to land transfers prevented the consolidation of farmland and in turn the formation of larger farming units (Noguchi 1992; Godo 2007; Jentzsch 2016), while market protection and state support also contributed to the reproduction of small-scale agriculture (George Mulgan 2000). Farming, however, became increasingly unprofitable and unappealing for the children of farming households, especially following the progressive contraction of job opportunities in rural areas since the late 1980s. Japan is now experiencing rapid deagrarianisation and a slow process of concentration. As a result, agricultural production and land under cultivation continue to shrink, and small, fragmented plots are farmed by an exceptionally aged workforce (MAFF 2015a).

Processes of agrarian change are linked to the transformation of food supply chains. The growing concentration upstream and downstream farm and the restructuring of food chains operated by large food retailers in particular has led to a situation whereby small farmers are increasingly marginalised and driven out of business (McMichael and Friedmann 2007; Young 2012). Even in this regard, Japan provides a peculiar case, most notably due to the presence of a powerful farmers' cooperative group influencing the way food is produced and distributed. While alternative food networks have recently received much attention by anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers, different configurations of 'conventional' food distribution have enjoyed much less consideration. Popular concepts such as 'corporate food regime' (McMichael 2009) and 'food empire' (Van der Ploeg 2008) central to what Bernstein (2014, 2016) dubs the peasant turn of agrarian political economy have arguably contributed to obscure significant differences characterising agri-food systems in capitalist economies. As Wilkinson and Goodman (2019:143) point out, the

homogenising framework of 'regimes' and hegemonic strategy fails to recognise alternative developmental trajectories and highly differentiated institutional landscapes. To be sure, many scholars in the field of agri-food studies recognise how 'agricultural change is shaped and reshaped in different places and at different scales and grounded in specific historical geographies' (Niles and Roff 2008:3), highlighting the permeability and multiplicity of production systems (Dixon 2002), competing 'worlds of food' (Morgan et al. 2006), or food networks (Goodman 2003). Ongoing debates on the emergence of a 'third global food regime' (Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2005, 2009; Bernstein 2016) or on a 'second great transformation' of agriculture (Allaire and Daviron 2020) exemplify difficulties in reconciling diversification occurring within and among agri-food systems and well as processes of agrarian capital accumulation.

Uniqueness characterising Japanese agriculture has been often highlighted in previous studies denouncing the detrimental effects of Japan's agricultural policy regime (e.g. Hayami 1988; George Mulgan 2000, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015; Honma 2015; Yamahita 2015; Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016; Honma and George Mulgan 2018;), yet only a few attempts have been made to contextualise Japan's case within a broader agri-food theoretical framework (Whittaker and Scollay 2019; Hisano et al. 2018; Sekine and Bonanno 2016). This appears especially important as Japanese agriculture is transforming rapidly under the pressure of market forces and political reforms (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016; Sekine and Bonanno 2016; Jentzsch 2016), possibly suggesting global convergence. In terms of research outlook and methodology too, while numerous studies exist based on statistical analysis of economic indicators, as Godo (2012:32) points out, what actually happens on a farm has been largely overlooked by agricultural economists and other social scientists. Needless to say, the condition and the challenges faced by economic actors can only be fully appreciated in relation to their wider institutional context. As McRae (2016:228) and others (e.g. Perfecto et al. 2009:7; Pritchard et al. 2014:59; cited in McRae 2016:228) point out, research on agri-food systems from the perspective of national policy and global markets on the one hand and bottom-up views focussing on local food traditions and actors on the other are rarely combined

and integrated. ‘These two “food-world-views” often appear worlds apart, and their proponents routinely talk past each other’ (McRae 2016:228).

This study attempts to address the above shortcomings using the experiences of new entry farmers as a window on to Japan’s agri-food system. New farmers look with fresh eyes at agricultural issues, so their experiences provide a unique vantage point over the institutions shaping rural and agricultural life. Based on one year of fieldwork in Japan and on eight months of participant observation conducted in Nagano prefecture in an agricultural cooperative offering a training programme for aspiring farmers, this study explores the possibilities of agricultural-based modes of livelihood in Japan, the revitalisation of rural regions, and the transformation of Japans’ agri-food system. Working in the fields alongside trainees allowed me to witness the hardships and the enjoyment experienced by aspiring farmers along their journey, as well the numerous challenges they face. Participant observation was complemented by 68 interviews with new entry farmers, officials from local governments, agricultural cooperatives, and organisations promoting urban to rural migration and new entry in agriculture. To better understand individual choices and the mutually constitutive relationship between agency and structure, institutional analysis alternates with ethnography throughout the thesis. Agricultural policy, farming practices, and fresh food distribution in Japan are also compared with EU countries and Italy in particular, shedding new light on different configurations of food provisioning in capitalist economies.

This study contributes to anthropological literature on regional Japan, processes of agrarian change, food consumption, and price formation in commodity markets. This study also challenges on various levels the received view on Japanese agriculture in the English-speaking world, most notably informed by the extensive work of political scientist Aurelia George Mulgan (e.g. 2000, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2016). This literature, based on a rational choice, interest-based perspective, and mostly concerned with party politics, ministerial bureaucracy, and trade policy, emphasises the privileges of Japanese farmers and explains institutional inertia in agriculture largely as defensive vested interests. This view is largely accurate, but also too simplistic for it

overlooks the complexity of material, social, and institutional factors inhibiting change. This study documents the constellation of forces driving the reproduction of Japan's agrarian structure while also providing a more comprehensive and nuanced account of the role of agricultural cooperatives and JA group, which the literature mentioned above unequivocally depicts as an interest group acting against the interests of consumers, professional farmers, agriculture, and other industries.

The thesis is organised as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the fieldwork and research methodology of this study. Chapter 2 presents literature on pro-rural migration and rural revitalisation in Japan, as well as previous studies on pro-rural migration in other countries. Several debates are revisited in the light of findings. Chapter 3 presents literature on Japanese agriculture, with a focus on issues of generational renewal. The remaining chapters are thematically organised around the four key hurdles faced by new entry farmers: the acquisition of land and housing, farming know-how, investment capital, and market outlets. Chapter 4 addresses the mounting problem of land and house abandonment in regional Japan, and the paradox of new rural settlers struggling to access farmland and houses for rent. Findings show how different social norms, laws, and institutions shape the bundle of rights surrounding property. Chapter 5 focuses on quality standards in agriculture and options available to aspiring farmers in acquiring farming know-how. The first part of the chapter documents the peculiar evolution of fruit production-consumption in Japan and the reproduction of labour-intensive farming practices. The second part of the chapter discusses the acquisition of farming skills by new entrants and the pros-cons of different training paths, with a focus on the case of JA Ueda Farm, the organisation where I conducted participant observation. Chapter 6 discusses forms of financial support available to new entry farmers, the recent evolution of agricultural policy promoting farm enlargement, mismatches between policy goals and new entrants' aspirations as well as between policy regulation and its local implementation. The second part of the chapter considers the role of agriculture in the revitalisation of rural communities and the sustainability of different agrarian models. Chapter 7 illustrates marketing options available to new entrants and the strategies they choose to adopt. The first part of

the chapter focuses on the diffusion of direct sales vis-à-vis traditional distribution, and on how many new entrants choose to capitalise on their marketing skills. Through the case of Nagano and Ueda JA, the chapter then discusses the ongoing transformation of agricultural cooperatives' marketing, the role of the fresh food wholesale market, and controversies surrounding its recent reform. The conclusion chapter summarises the findings of this study and discusses contributions to the literature.

Chapter 1

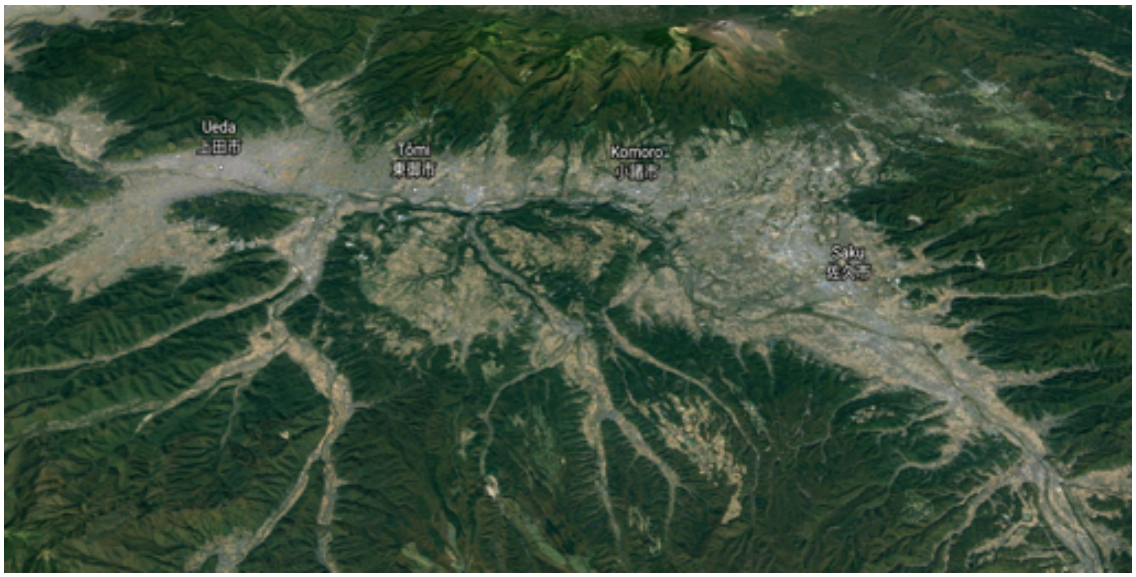
Fieldwork and research methodology

The valley enclosed between the mountain ranges of Asama and Yatsugatake occupies most of Nagano prefecture's eastern region (*Higashi Shinshū* or *Tōshin chihō*). The valley stretches north-west to south-east, crossed throughout its length by Chikuma River, Japan's third major river. Situated on the crossroads of the Kyoto-to-Edo Nakasendo and the Hokkoku road to the Sea of Japan, since the Edo Period the region connected Tokyo with Nagano city and western Japan. The basin, where most of the population lives, is surrounded by mountains, forests, and high fields. Popular tourist destinations include ski resorts, hot springs, and summer resort towns. The region also counts historic heritage sites such as Saku city's Teishoji temple, Tōmi City's post town of Unno Juku, and Komoro city's Kaikoen castle, to name a few. Ueda and Saku are the two largest municipalities, with a population of 156,000 and 99,000, respectively. The two cities expanded as a result of successive administrative mergers in 1961 and in 2005, and together accounted for 60% of the population living in eastern Nagano.[2] Attempts to merge administrative bodies also took the form of the creation of two major districts (*chiiki*), Ueda *chiiki* (now Jōshō *chiiki*) and Saku *chiiki*, today incorporating the 18 city-town-villages in the region.

Municipalities and different areas within larger municipalities are extremely diverse in terms of size, geography, population density, demographic structure, and economy. Highland areas like Kawakami mura are very rural, and their economy is primarily based on agriculture. Karuizawa is a wealthy, well-known resort town heavily relying on tourism. Urban centres like Ueda city and Saku maintain a relatively strong manufacturing industry and a relatively young population, while secluded villages like Tekeshi mura are rapidly depopulating. General trends of depopulation and population ageing have unevenly affected different municipalities in the past half-century. While

[2] Ueda and Saku are cities only in the most artificial sense of the word. Not only is their population scattered over a vast area in the typical urban sprawl pattern characteristic of many parts of regional Japan, but many inhabitants still live in small villages on mountain sides.

most small hamlets have been progressively abandoned, for larger communities this depends on numerous variables, including their connection to major urban centres, the survival of local industries, and the success of local revitalisation initiatives typically based on tourism promotion.



The Chikuma basin in eastern Nagano prefecture (Source: googlemap).

Like in other parts of Japan, infrastructural development has been a significant factor in the transformation of the region. The opening of the Hokuriku Shinkansen line in 1997 significantly reshaped the human geography of the Chikuma basin, with old urban centres abandoned and new ones developed. The area surrounding Sakudaira new Shinkansen station in Saku city underwent rapid urban development in the past twenty years, with new malls, supermarkets, and residential areas now rising on what not too long ago was paddy fields. At the same time, the old city centre of Saku saw a steep increase in the number of abandoned houses and shops. The once lively *shōtengai* (shopping streets) are now mostly deserted, and the area is increasingly rundown. Ueda city is now only 90 minutes away from central Tokyo and greatly benefitted from the new bullet train both in terms of tourism and an increase in the number of residents. On the contrary, Komoro city, previously one of the major tourist destinations in the area, was cut out from the new line and experienced a significant demographic decline as well as a decreasing number of visitors. Many

shops and restaurants closed, and the city centre became increasingly shabby, in turn prompting house abandonment and outmigration. 'Komoro used to be very lively, but it has become a sad place,' my landlord used to repeat often.

The region has overall experienced a process of deindustrialisation in the past decades, but some municipalities like Ueda city have maintained a healthy manufacturing industry that continues to absorb a significant share of the employed population (32% in 2015). The tertiary sector occupies the largest share of the working population in the region, especially in urban areas (58% in Ueda city). Like in most parts of Japan, since the late 1980s agriculture has experienced an overall decline both in terms of cultivated land and share of employment. Similar to demographic trends, agriculture displays a significant degree of diversity within the region. Before discussing these differences, it is useful to briefly summarise the state and recent transformation of agriculture in Nagano prefecture at large (MAFF 2016).

Partly due to its mountainous geography, Nagano prefecture is characterised by a large number of small farming units, with 68% of commercial farms operating on less than 1ha compared to 56% nationwide.[3] Rice accounts for 35.9% of the total production area, below the national average (38%). Vegetable production accounts for 25.7% of the total, two times the national average (12.8%). Fruit accounts for 15.7%, almost three times the national average (5.6%), while grains (2.8%) and stockbreeding (9.9%) occupy a low share compared to the rest of the country (6.6% and 24.6% respectively). The prefecture is the first producer of lettuce and celery nationwide, the second largest producer of Chinese cabbage, apple, plum, grape, and buckwheat, and the third largest producer of asparagus, pears, and peaches. Overall agriculture underwent a steady decline in recent decades. Between1995 and 2015, total production value fell by 23% (from 305 to 232 billion yen) and cultivated land by 14% (from 127,300ha to 108,900ha).[4] In the same period, the number of

[3] 31% operate on less than 0.5ha, 38% between 0.5 and 1ha, 20% between 1ha and 2ha, 8% between 2ha and 5ha, and 3% above 5ha.

[4] Total production value increased by 3.5% between 2010 and 2014 thanks to the expansion of vegetable production and despite lowering value-volume of all other crops (in the same period total production volume decreased by 9%).

commercial farming households decreased by half (from 103,674 to 51,785).[5] The farming population progressively aged, and 55% of the 73,483 people prevalently occupied in agriculture in 2015 were above 70 years of age (38% between 60 and 70, and 17% under 60s). The distribution of commercial farming households by gross sales resembles the national situation: 9% display no sales, 52% less than one million yen (roughly £7,500), 25% between 1-5 million yen, and 14% over 5million yen (roughly £38,000). Only 23% of commercial farming households derive most of their income from agriculture (the national average in 2015 was 22%).[6]

Significant differences exist between areas-municipalities in the prefecture as well as between different JA units. Nagano prefecture currently counts 16 agricultural cooperatives. Their numbers have steadily decreased since the 1950s following successive mergers, which, similarly to government amalgamations, remain a highly controversial issue.[7] Although cooperatives can generally benefit from amalgamations, cooperatives with a healthy agricultural division (i.e. not running a deficit) usually have little incentive to merge with their neighbours, and often refuse to do so.[8] Nakano-shi JA provides an emblematic example. On the map it appears as a small island within the larger Nagano JA, with which it refuses to merge. Despite its small size, JA Nakano-shi is a

[5] A 'commercial farm household' (*hanbai nōka*) is a household that manages cultivated lands of more than 0.3ha (3,000m2) or earns more than 500,000 yen (roughly £3,500) per year from sales of agricultural products. The number of 'self-sufficiency farming households' in 2015 was roughly the same as that of commercial households, or half the total number of farming households (nationwide they only represent 41%). A 'self-sufficiency farming household' (*jikyuteki nōka*) is a household that manages cultivated lands from 0.1ha to 0.3ha (1,000-3,000m2) and earns less than 500,000 yen per year from sales of agricultural products.

[6] Commercial farming households whose main source of income is farming, and which possesses at least one family member under the age of 65 who is engaged in self-employed farming for more than 60 days per year are classified as 'business farming household' (*shugyō nōka*).

[7] Administrative amalgamations are often contested as they subtract decision-making powers from local incumbents in communities that retain distinct history and sense of identity.

[8] See, for instance, Ganseforth (2020).

wealthy cooperative because most of its members specialise either in mushroom or fruit production.[9]

Agriculture in eastern Nagano prefecture is somehow representative of general trends in the prefecture. While in recent years highland vegetable production areas like Kawakami mura consolidated their position nationwide as major producers of leaf vegetables, agricultural production in the Chikuma basin and surrounding areas have steadily declined. In the basin, where agriculture is predominantly centred around rice farming, total cultivated area progressively shrunk due to sustained urbanisation. On mountainsides, where farming lots are tiny and fruit production is widespread, reduction of the cultivated area was primarily due to farmland abandonment.[10] Producers in highland areas on the contrary progressively specialised on leaf vegetables (in particular cabbage and lettuce), high-value crops that are suitable for highland climate allowing season extension. Highland areas are also characterised by larger, more consolidated farms, and are in turn less afflicted by problems of farm succession and farmland abandonment.[11] Eastern Nagano prefecture counts three agricultural cooperatives: Shinshu Ueda, Saku Asama, and Nagano Yatsugatake. The former two gather producers in the basin and surrounding areas, while highland areas fall under the latter.[12]

Shinshu Ueda JA (hereinafter Ueda JA or JA Ueda) is, in many ways, a typical agricultural cooperative characterised by an average size, a shrinking and ageing farming population, an

[9] Only cooperatives with a high level of crop specialization tend not to run a deficit in their agricultural divisions. Crop specialization creates economies of scale in sorting and processing facilities, guarantees better leverage on the market, and allows cooperatives to cut the number of technical staff/agronomists (*shidō-sha*) that they must employ. It must be noted that even though cooperatives' agricultural divisions run a deficit, this does not directly reflect on members' income. It only means that membership fees and handling fees collected by JA are insufficient to cover costs (employees' salaries, running facilities, and various services provided to members). Cooperatives cover the deficit of their agricultural divisions with profits derived from their more profitable divisions (banking and insurance).

[10] Farmland abandonment is linked to the rapid pace of depopulation and population ageing in these areas and to the fact that small, isolated plots are more likely to be relinquished. The farmland abandonment rate in Ueda district stood at 19.4% in 2017, the same as the prefectural average. However, the figure is much higher on mountainsides and villages like Chōwa-machi and Aoki-mura. Farmland abandonment rate is calculated as abandoned farmland / (abandoned farmland + cultivated land under management).

[11] Highland climate is unsuitable for most crops and especially for paddy field agriculture. This explains specialization on vegetable production as well as greater farmland consolidation.

[12] Other two large, independent cooperatives operate in highland areas, so many producers are not members Nagano Yatsugatake JA. On the contrary, most farmers in the basin area are members of Shinshu Ueda JA and Saku Asama JA.

unprofitable agricultural division, and a low level of crop specialisation.[13] In order to revitalise the local agriculture, Ueda JA tries to strengthen the brand of its best products and encourages the conversion of low-value crops into high-value crops.[14] It also promotes generational renewal by attracting new entry farmers and for this purpose, established a training programme managed by a subsidiary company, JA Ueda Farm, the organisation where I conducted participant observation. In recent years, an important initiative has been the establishment of numerous direct sales stores (*chokubaijo*), which in 2016 accounted for 13.3% of total produce (value) handled by the cooperative (see Chapter 7). Ueda JA and local administrations in the district (in particular Ueda city and Tōmi city) have also been promoting the expansion of the local wine industry. Not only is wine a value-added product that can potentially provide high income for farmers, but its growing popularity nationwide makes it a valuable resource to develop agro-tourism and improve the brand name of the region.

Tōmi city (Tōmi-shi), where most of my fieldwork was based, is the municipality that invested the most in the development of a local wine industry. Tōmi is a new municipality created in 2004 with the amalgamation of two smaller towns, Tōbu machi and Kitamimaki mura. The city is located on the southern side of Asama Mount range and occupies an area of 112km2, stretching from 470m to 2,228m above the sea level. Its population in 2018 was 30,261. The town is divided into five quarters, roughly corresponding to old hamlets. Settlements extend on the slope of the mountain, with most of the population concentrated in the Chikuma basin area. Despite its small size and rural character, Tōmi is in many ways a vital and dynamic town. The area around the train station has been recently renovated and counts several restaurants, shops, and fancy cafes. Its growing wine industry contributes to enhancing the local food scene, with chefs appositely hired to create new dishes to pair with wine using local ingredients. The city was ranked as the most

[13] In 2017, Ueda JA handled produce for roughly 9 billion yen in value.
[14] In the case of fruit, it encourages producers to substitute old tree varieties with new ones that are more in demand and more productive. For instance, in its 2016 whitepaper, Ueda JA urged its members to plant 4,300 new trees of Shinano Leap (a newly developed, early harvest apple variety) and 2,500 trees of Shine Muscat (Japan's most popular grape variety).

liveable (*sumi-yasui*) town in the prefecture by Toyo Keizai in 2015. Among its strengths, as emphasised by the city website, Tōmi features sunny weather, low snowfall in the winter, easy access to Tokyo (90 minutes by train), and availability of childcare facilities.[15] As discussed in Chapter 2, these are all features greatly appreciated by urban-rural migrants. The local I-turn promotion office is well organised and active.[16] A new entry farmer from Osaka told me that she decided to come to Tōmi because, unlike other municipalities she had visited, employees at the city hall were very helpful and motivated. Tōmi also features various tourist attractions. From the train station, visitors can easily reach Unno Juku, a post station established in 1625 on the old Hokkoku Kaido. The street counts 203 well-preserved historical buildings conserving their unique Edo period atmosphere. On top of the mountain, Yunomaru heights allows convenient half-day hikes. From mid-June to early July 600,000 blooming stocks of Japanese azalea offer a unique sight. The city also counts several hot springs, sports facilities, and a small ski ground. It also hosts many festivals throughout the year, including outdoor kabuki performances and a wine festival.

Tōmi-shi.

Tōmi is a small mountain municipality that saw a moderate, yet steady urban development even after the 2000s. Major streets are crowded with gas stations, restaurant chains, home centers,

[15] Five kindergarten, five elementary schools, two junior high schools, one high school.
[16] 'I-Turn' is an expression indicating urban-to-rural migration (details in Chapter 2).

convenience stores, supermarkets, and pachinko. Electricity pylons rise between them, with cables and electric wires hanging along the streets. Between major broadways and the constant flow of cars and trucks, there is a web of streets and narrow alleys, often only drivable by one car at once. This intricate maze crosses residential areas, orchards, small shrines, and little shops only open from time to time. The town is on the mountainside, so most residential areas and fields are terraced or on a slope, offering a stunning view of the Chikuma valley. Some buildings are in a state of disarray, but, compared to the nearby town of Komoro, the town does not look run down. Parks and public buildings such as schools and sport centers are in good conditions. A new city hall with a modern architecture had been recently built near the train station, conferring to the town's 'centre' a dynamic look. As one goes up the mountain, houses become more sparse. Convenience stores and supermarkets are nowhere to be found, and terraced paddy fields become more widespread than apple and grape orchards. The small hamlets are quiet. Excluding some passing car, the most common noise is the endless barking of dogs from people's front yard. Halfway between the basin and the top of the mountain, at about 800m above the sea level, is where most of Tōmi's well-known vineyards were established. The area, previously covered with mulberry trees, is now home of wineries and some restaurants where tourists and local residents can enjoy a glass of wine and the beautiful scenery. Above this area the mountain becomes steep, and entirely covered with forest. The few buildings and fields left have been long abandoned. Two roads lead to the top of the mountain, to a ski area and a famous hotspring.

As a small, rural municipality, Tōmi has not been afflicted as severely as many parts of Japan by downward demographic trends (Tōmi-shi 2018a). The population peaked in 2004 (31,396), but its decline has been moderate (3.6% reduction in the past 15 years). Net outmigration is negligible (51 people/year on average in the past ten years), and population shrinkage is mostly determined by natural change.[17] The population has aged at a pace slightly below that of the prefecture.[18] One-

[17] Crude birth-rate in the past ten years was 8.3, compared to the national average of 7.9.
[18] In 2015, the elderly population represented 28.9% of the total, as compared to the prefectural average of 30.1%.

third of the working population in 2015 was employed in the secondary sector. While the number of workers employed in construction decreased sharply (from 1,901 to 1.001 between 1995 and 2015), manufacturing did not experience a significant decline (from 4,775 to 3,989 workers between 1995 and 2015, with an increase between 2010 and 2015) and remains a central industry.[19] As in most parts of Japan, the number of small shops steadily declined with the diffusion of supermarkets and large retailers. The tertiary sector employs the largest share of the working population (8,449 people in 2015), with healthcare and welfare as the most rapidly expanding sectors.[20]

In 2015, 11.8% of the working population (1,812 people) engaged in agriculture (the figure includes part-time farmers). Like in the rest of the Chikuma basin and surrounding areas, agriculture experienced a decline in farming population, total cultivated land, and output volume. Between 1995 and 2015, the number of commercial farming households decreased from 2,231 to 1,270 (-43%) and the number of self-sufficiency farming households increased from 788 to 1,099. At the same time, in the same period, it is possible to observe an increase in the number of 'business farming households' (*shugyō-nōka*)[21] (from 382 to 405), suggesting a slow process of farm enlargement. The number of commercial farms operating on less than 1ha decreased from 1,208 to 914, while farms operating on 1-3ha and on more than 3ha increased respectively from 215 to 286 and from 53 to 57. Available data also indicates a diffusion of high-value crops like leaf vegetables.[22]

Fruit is one of the major produces in Tōmi. Average annual rainfall (805mm) is extremely low, which makes the area suitable for fruit agriculture. Apple and peaches are widely cultivated, but Tōmi is especially known for its grape. Grape production started in 1956 with the establishment of the first 1.1ha orchard of *Kyōhō* variety in Tōbu machi (now Tōmi). A strong cooperative spirit

[19] Two large companies employ about half of all manufacturing workers: Nissin Kogyo, a producer of brake systems for motorcycles (1,261 employees), and Mimaki, an industrial printer maker (782 employees).
[20] The city counts two hospitals and 16 clinics.
[21] Over half of income derived from agriculture.
[22] The only crop that increased significantly in recent years, in terms of cultivated area, was lettuce (from 16h to 23ha between 2012 and 2016).

marked the development of grape agriculture among farmers, who, since the beginning, shared sorting and shipment facilities, sales, and research under JA production groups (*bukai*).[23] A *Kyōhō* matsuri started to be held every year in late September, attracting over 40,000 people. In 1998, two production groups (Wa-Kyōhō and Shigeno-Kyōhō) merged to achieve a stronger position in markets under the motto '*ryō wa chikara nari, hinshitsu wa shinyō nari*' (volume becomes power, quality becomes trust). Grape provided high income for farmers, but already in the early 1990s, the problem of lack of farm successors and ageing of the farming population started to become evident. This was about the time when the prefectural government began to promote '*ninaite ikusei*' policies (policies promoting new entry in agriculture). In 1999, Tōbu (Tōmi) JA established a training centre for aspiring grape farmers accepting two people per year, but this did not stop the ageing trend, and by 2005, 70% of grape farmers in Tōmi were over 65 years old. The peak of grape production was reached in 1991 with a total cultivated area of 170ha that declined to 135ha in 2008.[24] Aside from general, common trends of population ageing and lack of farm successors, the decline of grape production in Tōmi was also due to other factors. As previously mentioned, mountainside areas are characterised by small, fragmented farming units. In this situation, it is common for small, isolated, less-productive plots to be abandoned as farmers age.[25] Price has been another key factor. Lowering fruit consumption led to overall declining prices for fruit, and *Kyōhō* grape, in particular, started to lose popularity among consumers. Prices peaked in 1998 and continued to decrease until recently.[26] Like in other parts of Japan, Tōmi grape production group started promoting new grape varieties and farming techniques preventing seed development.[27] Grape is today a profitable, high-value crop

[23] At the time under Tōbu JA, which was merged into JA Ueda in 1994 during the 'JA large mergers' period.
[24] In Nagano prefecture, the production peak was reached in 2004, with 2,550ha.
[25] This is true for the entire prefecture, where, in 2005, 65% of grape farmers operated on less than 1ha.
[26] Now that most grape farmers converted their production to new varieties, offer scarcity has brought up the price of *Kyōhō* grape. There is also a niche of elderly consumers explicitly asking for seeded grape, so even in Tōmi some producers purposefully force seed development in grape.
[27] Shine Muscat, today's most popular grape variety, was developed in 2007. However, that year it was not included in the plan of Nagano prefecture, which was trying to promote the new Nagano Purple variety (like Shine Muscat a seedless variety with edible skin). Nagano purple proved to be not very successful, and shine Muscat progressively replaced *Kyōhō* in grape orchards.

to grow. According to Nagano prefecture's consultation centre for agriculture, a 0.2ha (2000m2) orchard of Shine Muscat grape guarantees an average yearly income of 2.6 million yen (roughly £19,300).[28] Many old farmers without successors quit agriculture every year, but productive grape orchards are now in demand and are seldom abandoned.[29] Nagano prefecture is a popular destination among aspiring farmers from the city, and every year agricultural new entrants choose Tōmi for its grape production.

The importance of grape production was one of the reasons for the development of a wine industry in Tōmi. Table grape and wine grape are, of course, different, but have similar requirements in terms of climate and pest control. Unlike Yamanashi prefecture, where wine has long been produced using defective table grape that could not be sold on the fresh market, wine in Tōmi was since the beginning a rigorous enterprise. It all started in 1991 when writer and painter Toyō Tamamura relocated to Tōmi and planted the first 500 vines in a small orchard at 800m above sea level. Everyone told him that the area was not suitable for wine, but the grape proved to be of superior quality, and what started as a hobby slowly turned into a business. In 2004 he established Villa d'Este, a winery and restaurant annexe rising on the mountainside. The vineyard is now 8ha, and Villa d'Este is known as one of Japan's top wineries.

The success of Tamamura inspired other entrepreneurs. In 2005 Yoshiaki Hazumi quit his job in California and funded Hazumi Farm, now known as Japan's smallest winery. In 2009 Koyama Eiei, a sommelier and oenologist who worked for many years in the field, funded Rue de Vin, a winery and research centre providing a wine-making service for new entrants. In 2019 Tōmi counted six wineries, and another three were about to be opened. The city was recognised as a special production area (*tokku*) for wine in 2008, and, as a result, producers were exempted from national regulations on alcohol production, setting a minimum of 6,000 litres/year.[30] In other words,

[28] This can be considered as a respectable income in rural Japan. An orchard of 0.2ha is considered the average size that a person can farm alone.
[29] In 2018 the average leasing price for 1,000m2 of productive grape orchard was 17,200 yen compared to 8,900 yen and 3,800 yen for paddy field and dry field, respectively.
[30] The minimum is now 2,000 litres, approximately 2,600 bottles.

even small producers became able to establish their own winery. As the responsible person at Tōmi tourism promotion office told me, the local government is trying to attract small producers rather than big companies like in the neighbouring towns, Komoro and Ueda. Komoro was one of the first municipalities producing wine in Nagano. Manzu Wain, a subsidiary company of Kikkoman (Japan's largest producer of soy sauce), planted the first trees in 1971 and established a large winery in 1973. These days new vineyards are being established in Komoro, but for a long time, Mazu Wine was the only producer in town. In Ueda as well a large company, Mercia (Château Mercian Mariko Vineyard), dominates the wine scene. The company initially sourced grape from producers in Yamanashi prefecture, but in 2003 started its own production. It now cultivates grape on a total of 20ha and in 2019 inaugurated a large winery and resort annexe. In Tōmi, rather than big companies, the local government and pioneers like Tamamura continue to promote the initiative of small producers. The idea is that in this way it will be possible to foster a more diverse, interesting wine scene, and at the same contribute to local revitalisation by attracting many new settlers. As a matter of fact, the development of wine in Tōmi was entirely due to outsiders of the community, and even today new entrants are almost exclusively I-turners. Betting on the new trend, in 2015 Tamamura and Koyama founded Arc en Vigne, also known as Chikumagawa Wine Academy. The new wine academy offers a year-long course for aspiring winemakers, as well as a wine-making service.[31] In 2018 the academy already counted 62 graduates and 23 new students from all over Japan.

Tōmi continues to put energy and hope in the development of its wine industry. A policy plan with a budget of 150 million yen for the period 2016-2019 supported advertisement-branding campaigns, seminars on entrepreneurship, the use of local skills, and farm products to develop local gastronomy.[32] The local administration emphasises the importance of creating a local wine culture

[31] New entrants rely on existing wineries for vinification in the early years of production. Albeit most grape growers would like to have their own winery, this is not always possible because of the high costs involved. A practical solution can be to invest in a shared facility. In Komoro, eight producers were for instance, planning to build a shared winery.
[32] The city also provides special subsidies for the purchase of seedlings and trellis for the establishment of new vineyards.

and promoting wine consumption among residents. The institution of Tōmi Wine Festival is part of this effort. Wine can contribute to the revitalisation of the local economy by attracting investments and new settlers, but its true strength lies in the synergy it creates with tourism. Wine tourism can be a successful revitalisation strategy for cities like Tōmi benefitting from easy access to metropolitan areas, and the local administration is strongly betting on its potential to attract visitors from Tokyo. The tourist office next to the train station advertises winery tours and 'vineyard trails' allowing visitors to enjoy nature, wine, and fine dining. The city is often mentioned in specialised magazines and continues to draw attention thanks to the rising popularity of wine. Wine consumption in Japan has grown in the past years, and urban consumers are increasingly interested in domestic produce. Of course, consumers' expectations are today higher than twenty years ago, when the 'grape juice' produced in Yamanashi or Kanagawa prefecture was considered palatable by many. In order to ensure quality and consistency, in 2016 Tōmi administration, Ueda JA, and producers established a wine council to foster cooperation on branding and set shared standards.[33] Everyone wonders whether wine consumption will continue to grow given the lowering trend of alcohol consumption in youth. For sure, highland wine is attracting attention in and outside Japan, and Nagano wine has all it takes to be competitive in the domestic market.[34] Many people in Tōmi argued that in the forthcoming years it will be difficult to produce high-quality wine in the Kofu basin in Yamanashi prefecture (Japan's main production area) due to increasingly hot summers and that Nagano prefecture is the best candidate to take the wine podium thanks to its drier climate and cool summers. Together with the Chikuma wine valley born in 2013, the prefecture counts the other three production areas or 'wine valleys': Kikōgahara wine valley, Nihon Alps wine valley, and

[33] Main varieties grown in Tōmi are chardonnay, cabernet sauvignon, sauvignon blanc, pinot noir, and merlot.
[34] Highland wine is characterized by a low grade and extra flavour conferred by temperature excursion in the night. These are features that are increasingly appreciated by sommeliers and consumers worldwide.

Tenryūgawa wine valley. Nagano wine has slowly earned its reputation and will likely enjoy growing popularity.[35]

A vineyard on mountainside of Tōmi-shi.

Tōmi will see its reputation rise even more in the forthcoming years, thanks to the creation of Japan's largest vineyard. The 'Midō project' is a 9.9 hundred-million-yen (£7.5 million) project funded by state subsidies (50%), prefectural funds (27.5%), funds set by the local government (12.5%), and landowners (10%). The area, 33ha in total, is located on the mountainside in an area previously used for mulberry production (production was abandoned entirely after the disappearance of the local silk industry). The area was mostly covered by forest and had to be cleared up, terraced, and served with irrigation. Such a huge investment was only possible thanks to national subsidies, granted as a contribution toward a regional *rokujisangyō* project.[36] A major problem was to convince over a hundred landowners to lease their land to the prefectural farmland bank under unconditional authority in order to access subsidies that would cover the remaining 10% of the total investment.[37] The vineyard has been divided between seven producers, three of the major winemakers in Tōmi and four new entrants who were training at JA Ueda Farm during my fieldwork. The Midō project also involves the creation of a winery and restaurant annexe, and once

[35] In Tokyo I visited two wine bars exclusively selling products from Nagano prefecture.
[36] *Rokujisangyō* is an expression indicating the integration of production, processing, and distribution to create added value. Generous subsidies are available for investments going in this direction.
[37] See Chapter 3 for an explanation of farmland banks' functioning.

completed in 2021 will undoubtedly bring great prestige to the city. To be sure, the project was not devoid of criticism. Some people asked, for instance, why a handful of private companies should be the beneficiaries of a project funded with public money. Shimazaki san, the founder of a well-known agricultural corporation in the neighbouring town of Miyota, was very critical of 'wasting' such a large area of consolidated farmland on wine. 'Grape can be grown in small orchards while profitable crops like vegetables could greatly benefit from such economies of scale. Wine is all about marketing anyway.' Shimazaki san is also critical of encouraging new agricultural entrants to invest in wine production. 'Tamamura is rich and famous. He succeeded because he could rely on his fame, network, and money. But how about the young folks seriously thinking to live off wine? In Tōmi they encourage everyone to go and try, but I don't think many of them will succeed.' Whether wine entrepreneurs will be able to profit from their business is indeed open to debate. This is especially true when taking into account the return on investment of a property winery for small producers.[38] Another issue is whether new entrants will be able to sell thousands of bottles at an average price of 2,500-3,000 yen in a market dominated by decent foreign wine sold at one-third of the price. This is especially true following the signing of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) that entered into force in February 2019 and eliminated Japan's tariffs on European wines (previously 15%).

In any case, although from an individual perspective, the profitability of wine remains questionable, from the perspective of a rural community like Tōmi wine certainly has the potential to boost tourism, attract new settlers, and bring pride and prestige to the community as a whole.

[38] Most current/aspiring (wine) grape growers I met planned to build their own winery at some point in the future. The cost of establishing a small winery ranges between 40-100 million yen (£300,000-750,000). *Rokujisangyō* subsidies can cover up to 1/3rd of the investment. However, even then, this appears as an investment making little economic sense for a small producer aiming for 3,000-6,000 bottles a year (as the majority did). Some people plan to offer a winemaking service in order to increase the return on investment, which could make this a more feasible enterprise. In any case, my impression is that small-scale wine production on a property winery is more of a dream suited to wealthy-enough entrepreneurs than it is a sensible farming business (i.e. the risk is much higher than for most productions).

Research methodology

The empirical question driving this research was why so many new entry farmers from a non-farming background cannot secure sufficient income from agriculture despite the wide network of support available. One way to approach this study was to interview a large number of new entrants and aim for a sample that was representative of the situation nationwide. Together with its impracticality, this approach was problematic because the experiences of new agricultural entrants can be radically different depending on place, crop, age, gender, background, resources, etc. Any attempt to account for the 'national situation' would inevitably end up being very schematic and superficial. What is more, this kind of account already exists and is provided by statistics based on data from national surveys (e.g. NCA 2017). Together with quantitative studies, Japanese literature on new entry farmers is largely based on interviews, with material presented in the form of vignettes and life-histories. This literature provides a good overview of some of the difficulties faced by new farmers but does not offer an in-depth analysis of many key issues involved. As for most literature on pro-rural migration, the focus is largely on individuals' motives and background rather than on the environment and institutions with which they are confronted after their relocation. My goal was to learn about new entrants' goals, the obstacles they face, and how they negotiate them. Because of these reasons, I decided to prioritise depth over breadth and focus on a limited geographical area.

In terms of research methodology, I thought interviews alone would not suffice because of my insufficient knowledge of agriculture in Japan. My knowledge was very notional, almost exclusively derived from literature, and largely related to policy. Issues surrounding farmland and market access, or the acquisition of farming skills are place (and crop) specific. Without extensive knowledge of the context in which new entry farmers come to operate, information collected through interviews would be filled with unanswered questions and assumptions. Long-term ethnographic fieldwork was the best way to become knowledgeable about their context. As Musante (2014) points out, participant observation provides numerous advantages to field research.

'*First, it enhances the quality of the data obtained during fieldwork. Second, it enhances the quality of the interpretation of data, whether those data are collected through participant observation or by other methods. That is, participant observation is thus both a data collection and an analytic tool. Third, it encourages the formulation of new research questions and hypotheses grounded in in-the-scene observation* (Musante 2014:245).' Moreover, a mix of methods including participant observation and interviews can help addressing problems related to ethnographic bias (Musante and DeWalt 2010:95).

I had a few requirements in mind when choosing the site of fieldwork. I wanted to be in an area where I could meet many new entry farmers and trainees. Since one of my goals was to compare different training routes, I also wanted to be somewhere where I could meet people undertaking training in different programmes-institutions. There are many regions and municipalities that became popular among aspiring farmers from the city, but not as many matched my second criterion.[39] Since I was also interested in why new entrants choose certain crops and farming models instead of others and what different challenges-opportunities this entails, I also wanted to be in an area where I could meet new entry farmers growing different crops.[40]

Nagano prefecture matched all my criteria. Nagano is a popular destination among urban-rural migrants and new entry farmers in particular due to its climate, natural features, and relative proximity to Tokyo metropolitan area (NHK et al. 2015; Nagano-ken 2016).[41] The variety of agricultural training options available in Nagano also contributes to its popularity. For instance, as early as 2003, the prefecture instituted a comprehensive training scheme for aspiring farmers that

[39] Some municipalities host training programmes run by agricultural cooperatives and agricultural schools, but the most common option remains training under individual farmers or in agricultural corporations.

[40] Crops can be more land-intensive, capital-intensive, or labour-intensive. Some crops are relatively easy to grow, while others have a steep learning curve. Some crops are more dependent on the weather than others. Some are harvested several times a year, while others have only one harvest. Some benefit from well-established distribution channels, while others require more time spent on marketing, etc. Differences are so significant that the experiences of new entry farmers vary remarkably depending on the crops they choose to grow. Aside from my interest in comparing different cultivations, in choosing a site for fieldwork I had to consider the fact that only a tiny minority of new entry farmers engage in paddy field agriculture, and that it did not make sense for me to be in an area where rice farming is predominant.

[41] In relation to new entry farmers specifically, Nagano's dry climate allows the cultivation of numerous crops that are popular among aspiring farmers from the city, such as fruit and organically grown vegetable.

provided the model for the national financial scheme (details in Chapter 5). Finally, Nagano prefecture is characterised by a very diverse agricultural production (MAFF 2016).

Once I decided to conduct fieldwork in Nagano, I contacted the prefectural consultation centre for agriculture asking for advice. A representative in the centre suggested I conduct fieldwork in Tōmi city. Tōmi was presented to me as a popular municipality among new entry farmers from the city and a well-known fruit production region. I was knowledgeable about fruit farming in Italy and thought this could be useful in a comparative perspective. Most importantly, in Tōmi the regional agricultural cooperative runs a training programme for aspiring farmers and the neighbouring town, Komoro, hosts one of the training centres of Nagano agricultural school.

As part of my fieldwork in Japan, I originally planned to spend a few months in Kyoto during the winter, when Nagano is covered in snow and farming activities are suspended. I wanted to consult Japanese literature at the department of agriculture of Kyoto University, where my visa sponsor in Japan was affiliated, and interview members of organisations related to pro-rural migration in a metropolitan area. I also thought I might benefit from meeting some new entry farmers in a different area. The experiences of organic farmers in Ōhara, a small village near Kyoto, provided me, in fact, with a valuable point of comparison with new entrants in Nagano.

Fieldwork in Nagano was challenging and fruitful. I lived in a guesthouse in Komoro, right at the border with Tōmi, and in the morning commuted to JA Ueda Farm, the subsidiary company of the local agricultural cooperative running a training programme. On weekdays I worked with trainees from 8am to 1pm and spent afternoons writing field notes, meeting local residents, and conducting interviews. I was mostly based in Tōmi, but often travelled to neighbouring municipalities (Komoro, Ueda, and Saku) for interviews. Interviewees included new entry farmers, officials from local governments, agricultural cooperatives, and agriculture-related organisations. In Kyoto, I conducted interviews with new entry farmers, professors, and officials from organisations related to agriculture and pro-rural migration.

JA Ueda Farm is the organisation where I conducted participant observation. Working alongside trainees, JA employees, and senior farmers, and participating in JA technical lectures (*kōshūkai*), allowed me to learn about farming techniques and organisational aspects of JA. Being in the fields also allowed me to become acquainted with participants, learn about local agriculture, the city, and the difficulties involved in farming. Another advantage of participant observation was that it allowed me to ask questions anytime I needed. If something was not clear or doubts came to mind, I could simply ask trainees, local farmers, or JA employees. Luckily the working environment was very relaxed, and it was not a problem if sometimes I interrupted trainees or employees during work to ask questions.

Since I was interested in the progress of aspiring farmers from training to new entry, I tried to interview trainees as well as new farmers at different stages of farm management.[42] Thanks to the mediation of JA Ueda Farm's director, I could get in touch with new farmers who graduated from the programme in previous years. Through the agricultural consultation centre of Ueda district, I was put in touch with trainees under the prefectural training scheme as well as graduates from the programme. I also identified and contacted some participants online and through the WWOOF (an organisation connecting organic farmers and volunteer workers).

Together with observations of farming activity, this study is based on information gathered talking with farmers, local residents, and functionaries from many different organisations. I conducted 68 semi-structured interviews, 28 of which were with aspiring and new entry farmers. The length of interviews varied from one to two hours, with interviews taking place in a variety of situations and formats. While interviews with farmers followed a more standardized set of questions, those with functionaries in public organizations had varying emphasis depending on what I was mostly interested at the time or what insights I thought participants could provide. Recurring questions to farmers included their background, their reasons for starting a farm, the crops they

[42] New entrants I interviewed had been running their farm for a minimum of one year to a maximum of six years.

were growing, the market outlets on which they relied, their goals for the future, and difficulties they encountered accessing land and housing. While questions to farmers were more consistent throughout fieldwork, those to functionaries in public organizations varied.

As I became more knowledgeable about certain issues, my focus and priorities evolved. Talking to people and observing the way things were done in the fields allowed me to see things differently and redirect my priorities and focus based on the actual concerns of people, as opposed to those I imagined being more important. For instance, I was initially more concerned with farmland issues and lease contracts, but then I increasingly focused on housing issues. And it was only after observing the uniqueness of some farming practices that I became interested in the development of a high-end market niche for fruit in Japan. My interests also evolved based on what I considered to be more noteworthy from an agri-food studies perspective. For instance, it was only in the second half of fieldwork that I decided to deepen my understanding of JA distribution and dynamics of price formation. In this case my curiosity was prompted by regularly hearing that JA produce would be sold 'at the market' and frequent references to the fluctuation and variance of prices. I began to ask questions about 'the market' and the reasons for the variations in prices. Delving into such issues enriched my understanding of Japan's agri-food system, which was important to better contextualise the experiences of new entrants.

Fieldwork in Japan also included time spent doing readings at the department of agriculture at the University of Kyoto. This additional literature review process was a consequence of the findings and the new questions that emerged doing fieldwork. Thanks to my renewed grasp on Japan's fresh food market and Japan's housing market, I was able to ask better questions and better understand participants' choices.

Most of my fieldwork was based in eastern Nagano prefecture and in Tōmi city in particular. From this perspective, this thesis might classify as a regional study. On the other hand, because of my focus on new entry farmers, this study does not offer a comprehensive account of the region. This study draws on local instances to discuss trends and dynamics that can be observed in many

other parts of Japan. Issues discussed include the revitalisation of rural communities, farmland and house abandonment, shifts in agricultural policy, processes of agrarian transformation, and the transformation of food distribution. In the attempt to go beyond Japan's case and discuss broader trends occurring in other capitalist economies, I often attempt a comparison with EU countries and with Italy in particular on matters such as agricultural policy, farming practices, and food distribution. My choice is partly dictated by convenience (the fact that I am knowledgeable about agriculture in Italy), but also by the fact that Italy provides an appropriate point of comparison with Japan. Both countries are characterised by a smallholding agricultural structure, experienced a decentralised pattern of industrial development, are afflicted by similar demographic dynamics, and present similar geographic-morphological features.[43]

Ethnographic material is made more understandable through analysis of context, which is quite complex. Thus ethnography constantly alternates with institutional analysis, and, in some chapters, long sections are exclusively devoted to the latter. This choice was dictated by the fact that I placed higher importance on the structures shaping and constraining the activity of individuals than on individual life histories and experiences. Anecdotes and short vignettes are presented throughout the thesis, demonstrating the interaction of informants and their context.

Previous studies show that new entry farmers from a non-farming background experience similar problems in all industrialized countries and have similar motives for choosing to live in rural areas. In this perspective, rather than discussing at length the feelings and values of participants, I decided to focus on the challenges that they face. What makes Japan's case interesting and meaningful in a comparative perspective is the cultural and institutional environment in which new farmers come to operate. Whereas previous studies on new entry farmers abound with vignettes and life histories, the strength of this study lies in the in-depth contextualization of new farmers' undertakings.

[43] Italy and Japan have often been regarded as suitable for comparative studies in the literature (e.g. Samuels 2003; Francks 1995).

Observations of farming activity too would have been of little value without proper contextualization. For instance, descriptions of fruit farming practices are interesting on their own and illustrative of the difficulties faced by aspiring fruit farmers in Japan, but it is only when contextualized within the history of fruit consumption and agricultural policy that such observations shed new light on the reproduction of knowledge and food culture. I could have devoted more space to the way participants built their reputation using online social media, but I could not find anything particularly intriguing or revelatory about this. On the contrary, documenting how JA distribution has changed in the past decade through the case of JA Nagano and JA Ueda appeared to be more interesting and consequential.

Because participant observation mostly occurred in the fields working alongside trainees, my observations largely recount farming practices. Most of this material is gathered in Chapter 5, where I discuss the reproduction of farming knowledge and practices. Other material derived from observation is scattered throughout the thesis (e.g. the description of a small hamlet in Komoro, a store in Ueda, the encounters with local farmers, etc.). Excluding Chapter 5, most ethnographic material consists of extracts from interviews. I could hardly learn about the difficulties involved in securing a house or a sale outlet by means of observation, so interviews represented the primary source of information for such issues. Together with interviews, statistics from local institutions in eastern Nagano and Kyoto (e.g. JAs, *akiya* banks, agriculture consultation centres, etc.) represent a key source of information in this study. Statistical data contributes to contextualise the case of the new entry farmers I encountered and highlight differences with other parts of the country.

Rather than devoting long sections to the experiences of some participants, I choose to organize ethnographic material thematically based on the most common difficulties faced by aspiring and new farmers, their goals, and the strategies they choose to adopt. To produce and present inferences on the issues discussed, I had to identify recurring patterns and correlations. By focussing on recurring elements (e.g. the widespread tendency to keep their farms small or to choose marketing models based on direct sales), I was able to present findings in a more organized

way. Together with recurring elements, I also considered exceptions and what these might entail. I tried to beware of hasty generalizations and to consider possibilities beyond what I observed or heard. I believe that the propositions advanced in this study were drawn sensibly, keeping in mind the diversity characterizing the phenomena discussed.

A short paragraph in Chapter 5 relies on auto-ethnography to give the reader a sense of the excitement that new entry farmers might experience through new forms of embodiment, place-making, and entanglement with other beings. This is a stylistic choice that makes no claims to reliability, generalizability, or validity. As Ellis et al. (2010) point out, auto-ethnography can make texts aesthetic and evocative by using techniques of 'showing' (Adams 2006; Lamott 1994), which are designed to bring 'readers into the scene' – particularly into thoughts, emotions, and actions (Ellis 2004:142) (in Ellis et al. 2010: 277).

With one foot in anthropology, this study also draws on geography and rural sociology in the discussion of agrarian change and small-scale agriculture, as well as political economy. As previously mentioned, peasant societies are the focus of a of a large body of ethnographic literature. However, while anthropologists have prevalently explored the transformation of agrarian societies in developing countries, processes of agrarian change in capitalist economies can be mostly found in the rural sociology literature. Moreover, while anthropological literature on farming and peasant societies have comprehensively explored issues related to identity (Holland et al. 2001; Ofstehage 2019), gender (Barlett 1993; Barlett and Conger 2004; Keller 2014 Ofstehage 2018; Shisler and Sbicca 2019), racism (Grim 1995; Holt-Giménez 2006; White 2017; Biolsi 2018), ontology and human-non human relationships (Burow et al. 2018; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010; Ogden et al. 2013), a political economy approach central to this research has been mostly adopted in rural sociology. Food commodity chains are the object of numerous ethnographic studies, but are seldom considered from a food systems perspective. Commodity chains are rather the point of departure to discuss the effects of globalization on people's livelihoods, colonialism's heritage, gender issues, and aspects of modern capitalism (e.g. Mintz 1986; West 2012; Fabinyi 2013; Tsing 2009, 2015;

Faier 2011). Anthropologists exploring food production and food consumption in industrialised countries have often focused on the condition of foreign labourers or on alternative food networks and their link with the moral economy. Based on an ethnographic approach and a broad outlook on processes of agrarian change, this study attempts to fill this gap in the literature. From a broader social science or political economy perspective, this study attempts to consider land, history, and institutions comprehensively, and provide a more nuanced account of Japan's rural society and agri-food industry within broader trends of agrarian and capitalist transformation, in addition to understanding how urban-rural migrants and new farmers negotiate their institutional context.

Positionality and ethics

There is no such thing as bias-free research. Bias can take many forms and most notably sparks from one's ideas and beliefs. As previously mentioned, before fieldwork, my knowledge of the issues addressed in this thesis was almost exclusively derived from literature. Japanese agriculture and rural communities have been narrated from different angles by many authors, and especially when it comes to political topics like agriculture, one should be wary of ideological bias. Although I was not prejudiced toward any particular group or organisation, I inevitably carried with me preconceived ideas that subtly influenced my overall gaze and focus, my interpretation of participants' accounts, and my interpretation of data. For instance, when discussing market competition or power distribution in food chains, I had to make an effort to remain as neutral as possible and avoid implicit value judgements.

One way in which bias subtly manifests itself is through language. For instance, I speak of 'agriculture', but agriculture is a very diverse industry made up of millions of people growing and selling many different products in very different contexts. To approach agriculture as an 'industry' is in itself an analytical stance, so 'realm' is perhaps a better word. As in any other realm, material, social, and institutional dimensions are intertwined, and each element only makes sense in relation

to the others. With this research, I tried to account for this complexity, albeit in a limited setting and from a bounded perspective.

The bounded perspective of fieldwork inevitably generates bias. The risk is that of assuming that what was seen is all there is to be seen and to generalise observations to other contexts. This thesis inevitably puts forward some generalisations and attempts some comparisons, but this has been done sensibly. Among the many ways in which the site of fieldwork generated bias, I would like to make explicit my position relative to agricultural cooperatives and JA group. Since I conducted long-term fieldwork in an agricultural cooperative and I owe much to the people working there, one might legitimately claim that my perspective risks being overly sympathetic. That is possible, but I note, first, that I had no conflict of interest in this research, and I was not financially dependent on any of the organisations mentioned in this study. I worked for free at JA Ueda farm, which helped me to earn the support of the director and prevented me from feeling indebted to the organisation. Moreover, throughout this thesis, I remain critical of JA activity/agenda, and when discussing agriculture-related services, I always try to contextualise them and consider their broader implications. I am fully aware of the diversity characterising agricultural cooperatives, JA tiers, and that JA Ueda is by no means representative of the situation nationwide.

The organization of the material as well as my overall gaze are no doubt reflective of my personal and academic background. My background in political science has arguably influenced my writing style as well as my perspective. The emphasis on policy and institutions is perhaps unusual for an anthropology thesis, but I believe this study presents a balance between 'agency' and 'structure,' which is central to social science. Another element that influenced my approach was my previous work experience in agriculture. For instance, I went to the field with certain assumptions on what profitable agriculture looks like, but such assumptions were based on my experiences in different contexts. Despite limitations springing from preconceived ideas, my work experience allowed me to better contribute to farm work, participate to discussions, and answer people's questions. For instance, my working experience in walnut farms in different countries allowed me

to contribute to JA activities, as Tōmi city happened to be a walnut production area. Some cultivation techniques in Tōmi were quite obsolete, so I advised JA agronomists on how to improve them. I also taught people at JA how to make ‘nocino’, a traditional Italian walnut-based liquor. A collective farm run by JA Ueda farm director is now producing it as a complementary product.

My position during fieldwork was that of a European student from a prestigious university researching Japanese agriculture and rural communities. People at JA Ueda Farm were quite puzzled about my research, especially given my affiliation to an anthropology department. Trainees would often make jokes about it, saying that they were my 'human subjects.' My appearance and background influenced the way I was perceived by those around me, and in my own impressions of others. Being a young male was overall advantageous as it allowed me to participate in all work activities, be perceived as a productive member of the group, and possibly helped me to became closer to trainees as the majority of them were males. After a couple of weeks working with trainees in the fields, I became a friend with many of them. We often went out for drinks and shared stories and opinions. Employees and part-time workers at JA Ueda Farm were also friendly and supportive. The fact that I was a westerner, for many the first one they had ever had a chance to interact with, arguably contributed to everyone's benevolence toward me. My past work experience in agriculture was also helpful as it created a point of connection. My affiliation with a prestigious university also helped me immensely in accessing interviewees.

Language was another matter of concern. My level of proficiency in Japanese allowed to me to comfortably navigate daily life and conversations, but might have also led to some misunderstandings, especially when interacting with old local farmers using dialect and local idioms.

Ethical issues involved in this research are primarily related to protecting participants. Although this study does not touch on particularly sensitive topics, some of the issues discussed during interviews have political implications, and in answering certain questions some of the

participants criticised certain groups and organisations. Interviewees were fully informed about the scope and the character of interviews, and most of them have been anonymised.

Another concern is how to communicate the results of this study to its participants. Trainees at JA Ueda Farm in particular were very curious about my research and looking forward to hearing about my findings. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, none of the participants can read English. To obviate this problem, I am planning to draft a short summary in Japanese and send it by email to those whom I own a contact, albeit I know it will be difficult to communicate the findings of this study in just a few pages. In the future, shall I publish part of this study in Japanese, I will certainly share this material with the participants who might be interested.

Chapter 2

Pro-rural migration and regional Japan

Rural to urban migration has been the prevalent migratory flow in Japan since its post-war recovery. As in many other parts of the world, youth has relocated from the countryside into metropolitan areas seeking education, job opportunities, and urban lifestyles. Especially in the past half-century, Japanese regions have continued to experience population loss and ageing due to outmigration. Depopulation brought dramatic change, with many rural settlements being abandoned or brought to the verge of demographic extinction. The population left behind is an increasingly old one, often dealing with the decline of public services and facilities. Within this broader trend, Japan recently saw a small but consistent increase in the number of young urbanites relocating into rural regions. The trend has been dubbed '*den'en kaiki*', or 'return to the country.' What are the reasons for the recent trend? Who are urban-rural migrants, and why do they decide to move? While the remaining chapters are explicitly concerned with the experiences of new entry farmers, this chapter discusses pro-rural migration more broadly and its role relative to rural revitalisation.

Pro-rural migration

The movement of people from cities to rural areas is generally referred to as counterurbanisation. The term indicates a process of population deconcentration and is often used to describe the migration of urban residents from cities to 'smaller' or 'rural' areas, which location, size, or character are, however, unclear (Berry 1976:17).[44] In order to overcome problems related to a strictly geographical definition, counterurbanisation has also been defined based on individuals' motivations or adopted lifestyles, inevitably increasing the confusion surrounding the term (Mitchell 2004). Recognising the insufficiency of a single word to capture the complexity of

[44] For instance, the movement of people from city centres to suburban areas also represents an instance of counterurbanisation. The movement from the suburbs of large cities into the city centre of middle-sized towns is also difficult to define.

population deconcentration, scholars adopted new terminology. Significantly for the present research, migrants from cities to rural areas who attempt to achieve a predominantly agrarian lifestyle have been given several labels: neo-farmers, neo-peasants, new agrarians, and back-to-the-landers (Wilbur 2012). The term 'back-to-the-land' tends to be associated with the 1960s and 1970s counterculture that encouraged dropping out of mainstream society in search of alternative lifestyles often based on self-sufficiency or communal living in rural areas, for it was during this period that the term came into common use (Wilbur 2012). Although much of the literature on the subject relates to North America and the United Kingdom, rural migration with a 'countercultural flavour' occurred throughout many industrial nations. Halfacree (2007; 2012) emphasises the importance of distinguishing between reactionary 'anti-urbanism' and 'pro-ruralism', as well as forms of 'radical ruralism' associated with objectives broadly falling into a green and anti-exploitation agenda, including cooperative or non-profit economic systems, eco-sustainability projects, permaculture, and small-scale organic agriculture. Unlike counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Halfacree (ibid) sees contemporary pro-rural migration as not necessarily rooted in nostalgia for an imagined past or being driven by a rejection of contemporary society. In this perspective, 'pro-rural migration' and 'counterurbanisation' are preferable to 'back-to-the-land migration' in referring to the current phenomenon. During the 1970s, Japanese scholars coined the words *U-turn* to describe the movement of returnees to their place of origin, and the word *I-Turn* to indicate the infrequent movement of people born and brought up in cities toward rural areas (Wiltshire 1979). This terminology is convenient and will also be used hereinafter.

Pro-rural migration has been studied from different perspectives and through different methods. Existing literature is mostly found in geography and mostly based on Western Europe and North America. Following geography's 'cultural turn' of the 1990s, studies on counterurbanisation turned to individual experiences and social relations, making the motivations of migrants a key focus of research (Wilbur 2012:3). The new approach attempted to overcome past limitations, both in terms of theory (a predominantly functionalist narrative, the preponderance of life course and

push-pull factors explanations) and methodology (the preponderance of quantitative methods). Fundamental to the new approach was an engagement with migrants' biographies, experiences, representations of rurality, and the impact of migration on rural communities (e.g. Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Skeldon 1995; Cloke and Little 1997). More attention was paid to class and socio-economic status. Treating urban-rural migration as primarily a case of middle-class migration, scholars emphasised for instance how many locals feel disconnected from the newcomers and 'reveal a resentful attitude to the changes that they associate with in-migration, such as increased housing costs and a perceived disruption to social cohesion' (Cloke et al. 1998 in Wilbur 2012:21).

Hosszù (2009) differentiates between life course, structural, and behavioural approaches to pro-rural migration. Life course approaches remain useful frameworks to make sense of the phenomenon. While the lifecycle/life course varies significantly depending on geographical and social context and other axes of social difference cut across age, it is widely acknowledged that migration propensity varies by age and/or stage in one's life course (Tyrrell and Kraftl 2016). Structural explanations focus on macro trends (e.g. economic, political, technological, etc.) and constitute the basic framework of push-pull factors approaches. Behavioural explanations focus on individual motivations. They can be potentially discussed in a push-pull factors perspective but are generally treated in a less 'schematic' fashion.

Economic factors are usually central in explaining why people move, but, in the case of pro-rural migration, lifestyle-related reasons stand out as particularly significant. Lifestyle migrants can be broadly described as individuals relocating for non-economic reasons in order to lead a more meaningful life. Following Benson and O'Reilly (2009), migration becomes a route to a better and more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one left behind, a way for people to take control of their lives, or to release them from ties, enabling them to live lives more true to themselves. One of the problems with the term 'lifestyle migration' is that the lifestyle choices associated with the decision to migrate have tended to be those concerned with people's employment, education, age and social condition, possibly introducing some confusion between the

terms ‘lifestyle migration’ and ‘life course migration’ (Walford and Stockdale 2016:103)**.** The question is whether lifestyle migration constitutes a separate category of explanation for migration behaviours or simply repackages existing conceptualisations in a new terminology (ibid:111). More generally, the term risk being too vague and all-encompassing.

Another key explanatory element emphasised in previous studies on pro-rural migration is the role of sociocultural constructions of rurality. Rural areas are often imagined by migrants as offering ‘a sense of stepping back in time, getting back to the land, the simple or good life, as well as a sense of community spirit’ (Benson and O’Reilly 2009:612). Collective cultural inscriptions in the countryside are often linked to the pursuit of the ‘rural idyll’ (Little and Austin 1996; Van Dam et al. 2002; Woods 2010). According to Woods (2005:13), the rural idyll ‘presents an aspirational picture of an idealised rurality, often emphasising...pastoral landscape and...perceived peace and quiet’.

There is generally a considerable mismatch between idyllic ruralities and actual rural places. Studies on pro-rural migration have increasingly paid attention to the significance of performance in the constitution of rurality as geography researchers have sought to move beyond a social constructivist perspective (Woods 2010: 835). This includes attempts to access ‘more-than-representational’ rural geographies by investigating ways in which rural experiences are felt, sensed, intuited through bodily actions and performances. Affects and emotions brought about through engagement with rural materiality leave issues of representation to refocus on being existentially and sensuously ‘in’ the rural (Halfacree and Rivera 2011:105; Halfacree and Merriman 2016:150-155).

Pro-rural migration in Japan

Like many other industrialised countries, Japan experienced a substantial net inflow of migrants into major metropolitan areas from the end of the Second World War. Japan’s manufacturing industry grew rapidly, supported by the Pacific Coast Manufacturing Belt, an urban

conglomerate along the coast of the Pacific Ocean that included the three largest cities in the country, Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka. After two decades of sustained outmigration from rural regions, the 1970s saw a reduction of the net inflow into cities caused, among other reasons, by the emergence of return migration (Dzienis 2011).[45] Net outmigration in rural areas started to rise again in the 1980s (Dzienis 2011),[46] and, ever since, Japanese regions have continued to experience population loss and ageing due to outmigration. In the past half-century, counterurbanisation mostly constituted of returnees to their place of origin, either as retirement migration or in order to assist the elderly parents or take over the family business. So-called 'retirement farming' (*teinen kinō*) is a typical example discussed in Chapter 3. Unlike in Western Europe and North America, the movement of people born and brought up in cities toward rural areas has been extremely uncommon in Japan (Odagiri et al. 2014:26). The only reference to I-turners in English literature before the 2010s is in Knight (2003:28), who mentions groups of young organic farmers practising self-sustenance in eastern Wakayama prefecture.

What are the causes of the recent rise of pro-rural migration? In a push-pull factors perspective, the phenomenon can be interpreted as the effect of different trends and events, on the one hand contributing to the attractiveness of the rural, and on the other reducing the appeal of life in cities. As I will argue, the latter primarily derived from the effects of the 2008 financial crisis on the economy, and the former from the diffusion of new ideas of rurality. Another key factor was Japan's triple disaster of March 2011, which prompted environmental concerns and concerns relative to safety in cities among urbanites. The growing number of financial support schemes, initiatives, and advertising campaigns promoted by prefectures and municipalities to attract new settlers and, significantly for this study, the introduction of financial support measures for new entry

[45] Other causes include the economic recession that followed the oil shock of 1973, declining birth rates in rural regions leading to a shrinking pool of potential migrants, and the expansion of job opportunities in rural areas, mostly provided by construction and sub-contracting manufacturing companies.

[46] A key factor was arguably the progressive contraction of job opportunities in rural areas. In the 1980s many manufacturing companies started to delocalise their production abroad, while the 1990s saw a drastic contraction of public works, which had been fuelling the construction industry in many areas.

farmers, also contributed to the phenomenon. These elements are discussed in detail, together with individual motivations expressed by participants.

Urban-rural migrants

Since there is no obligation to change one's address when relocating to another municipality, it is difficult to get a clear picture of the phenomenon, but several studies suggest a growing trend of urban to rural migration in Japan since the late 2000s. A large survey conducted by the Mainichi newspaper, NHK, and Meiji University shows that urban residents relocating into rural municipalities each year increased steadily between 2009 and 2014, from 2,864 to 11,735 (NHK et al. 2015).[47] The growing number of new entry farmers from a non-farming background (MAFF 2019a) and volunteers participating to the programme for community revitalisation established in 2009 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Sōmushō 2019) also point to a rise in urban to rural migration.[48] Statistics indicate a growing interest in rural living among urban residents. According to a survey conducted by Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Sōmushō and MLIT 2014), between 2005 and 2014 the number of urban residents in their 20s, 30s, and 40s wishing to relocate into rural areas has increased respectively from 30.3% to 38.7%, from 17.3% to 32.5%, and from 15.9% to 35%. Furusato Kaiki, an NPO helping urban residents relocating to the countryside, received a steadily growing annual number of requests in the past decade, from 2,900 in 2008 to 41,752 in 2018 (Furusato Kaiki 2019).

Regional differences are significant and partial, scattered statistics from different organisations (prefectures, municipalities, ministries, NPOs, agriculture-related organisations, etc.) often do not include information on the age, gender, or marital status of migrants. Despite these limitations, it is possible to outline a general picture of urban-rural migrants. First of all, both U-

[47] The actual figure is certainly higher since the survey was only based on individuals relying on municipal support schemes and did not include Okinawa prefecture.
[48] The programme reached 5.359 volunteers in 2018 (Sōmushō 2019).

turners and I-turners belong to all age groups. As previously mentioned, the movement of middle age and senior returnees to their place of origin is not new, which suggests that the recent trend has been especially fuelled by younger generations. Data on returnees is scarce, but organisations supporting urban residents willing to relocate in rural areas provide useful information on aspiring migrants. Statistics published by Furusato Kaiki (2020) show that visitors/inquirers are increasingly young. In 2019, the demographic composition was as follows: 20s (18.2%), 30s (26.6%), 40s (22.5%), 50s (19.4%), 60s (9.6), 70s (3.6%).[49]

Regional differences are certainly significant. For instance, about 80% of visitors to Kyoto migration centre are below 40 years of age.[50] Given the very diverse demographic composition of migrants, it appears that lifecycle-life course explanations are not particularly useful in making sense of the phenomenon. Gender appears to be a more significant variable. According to statistics from Furusato Kaiki and Kyoto prefecture migration centre, roughly 60% of aspiring migrants are single men, while the rest is mostly represented by couples with or without children. Single women are rare. According to an official of the Osaka's branch of Furusato Kaiki, even in the case of couples, it is usually the male partner who put forward the idea to migrate and tries to persuade the other partner. While not conclusive evidence, this suggests an overall dominance of males in the recent pro-rural migration trend. This is certainly the case for new entry farmers, whose large majority is made up of men (MAFF 2019b).

[49] Statistics were based on a sample of 10,625 visitors-enquirers.

[50] Kyoto prefecture migration centre is an organisation providing counselling to aspiring rural settlers in the prefecture. The organisation, established in 2012, opened a new office in Osaka in 2016 and another one in Tokyo in 2017. A beautiful and comprehensive website provides information on job opportunities, financial incentives, and housing options in different municipalities. Despite Kyoto being a major tourist destination, the prefecture as a whole has been ageing and depopulating since 2005. In 2018 total population was 2,610,000 (of which 1,475,000 concentrated in Kyoto city). Birth rate stood at 1.24 (national average 1.42) and 27.5% of the population was above 65 years old (the national average is 26.6%). In 2009 Kyoto prefecture set up a policy plan (*sato-ryoku saisei akushon puran*) to save its 141 "marginal villages" (*genkai shūraku*) on the verge of extinction. The goal was to make local residents aware of the situation, prompt action, and attract new settlers. One of the initiatives that proved to be more fruitful was the setting of financial incentives for volunteers to reform old empty houses and create guesthouses for visitors. The plan was somewhat successful; in many cases volunteers decided to stay, and this lowered the average age of villages, which were removed from the *genkai shūraku* 'blacklist.' Kyoto prefecture had recently replaced the *genkai shūraku* label with the gentler '*tokubetsu kuiki*' (special locality) for its now 78 villages at risk.

Lifestyle migration

The choice to relocate from cities into rural areas typically springs from the desire to improve certain aspects of one's lifestyle. In her recent book on urban migrants in rural Japan, Klien (2020) shows a variety of careers and life courses: IT freelancers, entrepreneurs, and social workers in local revitalisation projects. She indicates the desire for a better quality of life and, in particular, for a better work-life balance as a key motive for urban-rural 'lifestyle' migrants. To be sure, dissatisfaction with poor work-life balance is not a new issue in Japan. Long working hours and other informal commitments are documented by numerous studies on Japan's working culture, as well as by recurring cases of *karōshi* (death by overwork) reported by Japanese media. The rejection of the hegemonic *salaryman* lifestyle by young Japanese started to be discussed in the 1990s, following the emergence of new 'social problems' such as freelancing youth, or *furitā* (Goodman et al. 2012). Another example of youth rejecting traditional career-life course paths are migrants moving abroad to pursue more fulfilling lives (Fujita 2009; Ono 2009; Nagatomo 2015; Favell 2015; Aoyama 2015). The biographies presented in this literature include many so-called *datsusara*, a term used to indicate 'company refugees' quitting their salaried job to start their own business. Klien (2020) emphasises the numerous analogies between lifestyle migrants abroad and urban-rural migrants, including their entrepreneurial attitude of many of them. Significantly for this study, most new entry self-employed farmers indicate 'being your own boss' as a key reason for their choice (NCA 2017:22). That being said, it would be wrong to equate urban-rural migrants with entrepreneurs. Klien (2020) arguably overrepresents this group in her account. According to data collected by Kyoto prefecture migration centre and the Osaka's branch of Furusato Kaiki, most aspiring migrants would like to find employment in companies or the public sector, while only a minority plan to start their own business.[51] According to data from Kyoto prefecture migration centre, about half of urban-rural migrants in the prefecture find jobs as public servants or company

[51] At the same time, it could be argued that aspiring entrepreneurs do not need counselling on job opportunities, so this group is under-represented in data from such organisations.

employees. In the case of new agricultural entrants from a non-farming background, employed farmers far outpace self-employed farmers nationwide (MAFF 2019a).

The availability of job opportunities is one of the major concerns for aspiring migrants. Judging by job ads, elderly care, and civil engineering are the most common employment options in rural areas. Odagiri et al. (2016) argue that job opportunities quickly appear after migrants settle in, and that, rather than one job, new settlers often successfully combine different sources of income. This is indeed a common strategy, if not an explicit goal, among many I-turners in search for diversifying lifestyles (*raifustairu no tayōka*). In *Han-nō han-x to iu ikikata* ('half-agriculture half-X' way of life), one of the popular books that inspired the recent rise of pro-rural migration, Naoki Shiomi (2008) argues that, in order to live more fulfilling lives, people should farm to sustain one's family and spend the rest of the time contributing to society and engaging in vocational activities. While agriculture is a way to satisfy one's physical needs and stay in good health, 'X' is a means of earning extra money and fulfil one's *ikigai* (purpose in life). To be sure, this idea is not so original and inspired much of pro-rural migration through the past half-century. Referring to I-turners in Wakayama prefecture during the 1990s, Knight (2003:28) describes the typical new settler as young, university-educated, practising organic farming, and aiming for a life of near self-sufficiency while pursuing artistic activities.

Notwithstanding individual preferences concerning employment, the decision to start a new life in the countryside is often related to work issues. This was the case for the majority of new entry farmers I met on fieldwork. The following vignettes offer a glimpse of the diverse demographics-background of urban-rural migrants and of the different work-lifestyle aspects they might seek to improve.

Thirty-five and thirty-four year old, Fuki and Tetsuya moved from Chiba prefecture to Tōmi in 2018 to start their agricultural training at JA Ueda Farm, just one year after getting married. They are both university-educated, and both worked in Tokyo after their graduation, Fuki in a bakery shop and Tetsuya as a web designer. Fuki chose to work as a baker instead of finding employment

in a company because she always wanted to 'work with her hands.' Tetsuya wanted a creative job allowing him to work independently. Soon after they met in 2013, they started to think about their future as they both agreed they did not like their current lifestyle. Tetsuya was sitting all day in front of a monitor, and Fuki spent entire days in a building without knowing whether outside it was day or night. 'On some days, I felt so bad. In the basement where I worked, there were no windows. I could only see the sun on my way to work.' They started to think about what to do, and agriculture appeared as a career option allowing them to work outdoors and reconnect with nature. They found employment at a farm in Chiba, initially working part-time to see whether they liked working on the land, and two years later decided to start training in Nagano to become independent grape farmers.

Forty-eight year old, from Chiba, Shibuya was also a trainee at JA Ueda Farm. He was married and had no children. After graduating from university, Shibuya worked for nine years at a record shop in Saitama, then for fifteen years as a convenience store manager. He was thirty-two years old when he took over the family business; a sake shop ran by his family since the late Edo period. The business was no longer profitable, so he decided to build a convenience store and sign a contract with 7/11 Holding. In 2017 the contract expired, and in order to renew it, Shibuya had to reform and enlarge the shop to comply with new safety-hygienic standards. He was tired of managing the store, so he decided to lease out the building and try to become a winemaker. He loved wine, and his family had been selling sake for generations, so he saw this as a way to continue the family tradition. The desire to change his work-life balance was a major reason for his choice. 'I didn't take holidays for years. I was so tired of working seven days a week and organising shifts for part-timers often quiting and letting me down. I really needed a change of pace.'

Sixty-one year old, Honjo san was also a first-year trainee at Ueda Farm. Originally from Kamakura in Kanagawa prefecture, he was the oldest trainee in the group. Honjo san worked as an accountant for an advertising company for 38 years after graduating from university. He was married, and in 2019, his 23 years old daughter came to live with him in Tōmi to become an organic farmer after spending a year in Denmark learning about permaculture. At the age of 43, Honjo san

was diagnosed with stomach cancer, and for many years he had to go through therapy and numerous surgeries. Once he recovered, he started to think about his future and began to consider becoming a farmer. He had an irregular life at work and felt that that lifestyle wasn't healthy. The idea of becoming a farmer started to consolidate after a work trip. He spent a month in the countryside to make a commercial for a fruit production group and felt it would be good to live in the countryside and work on the land. For Honjo san's generation, the retirement age is 60, so it was about time to think about what to do next. He was about to start *saikoyō* (employment after retirement) when he came across a book about rural living written by Toyō Tamamura, a novelist living in Tōmi city and main contributor to the development of the local wine industry. This was an inspiring reading for Honjo san. He visited Villa d'Este to meet Tamamura,[52] who encouraged him to join the wine academy and become a wine producer. Honjo san's case could be described as an example of retirement migration, but, unlike U-turn retirees, Honjo san is not taking over a family business. He owns no land or properties. Moreover, pension for his generation was cut, so farming cannot be simply a lifestyle choice but must also generate sufficient income.

The above examples offer a glimpse of the different work/lifestyle aspects individuals might seek to improve. While Fuki and Tesuya were unhappy about practical aspects of their previous jobs, Shibuya was mostly dissatisfied with his poor work-life balance. Honjo san, on the other hand, was prevalently concerned with health-related issues. Poor work-life balance and dissatisfaction with corporate working culture are not the only lifestyle aspects that urban-rural migrants might seek to change or attain. Other recurring themes include the desire to achieve a greater connection with nature and welfare-related benefits supposedly unavailable in cities. One example of the latter is young parents choosing to relocate in the countryside for childrearing-related benefits, an element also mentioned in studies on pro-rural migration elsewhere (Jensen and Svendsen 2007; Laoire 2007).

[52] The pioneer of wine in Tōmi (see Chapter 1).

Many Japanese couples face difficulties in raising children due to the shortage of childcare facilities in metropolitan areas (Borovoy 2009). Availability of childcare services is often a requirement for young couples when choosing their destination, and in some cases, the main reason for moving (Nīmi 2016). This was the case for a couple of new entry farmers from Tokyo now living in Saku. They had been thinking about relocating to the countryside for many years, but only made the decision when they discovered they were going to have a child. In their words, Tokyo was not a 'suitable environment' for childrearing. Other couples I meet on fieldwork decided to relocate after having children. This was not the primary reason for their decision but provided an additional incentive. According to an official at Furusato Kaiki, many young parents value the interpersonal bonds and the sense of community characterising small towns: 'knowing who your neighbour is' contributes to a sense of safety and relief, especially for couples with young children.

In many cases, the decision to move is prompted by a specific event. The loss of a job or the birth of a child are some of the examples presented so far. For Jiro, a new entry farmer living in Saku, the decision to relocate was instead influenced by a tragic, revelatory event.

Thirty-two years old, Jiro was born and brought up in Tokyo. In the third year of university, while his friends started job hunting, he had no idea of what he wanted to do in life. For five years, he moved from job to job, when, on March 11th 2011, the Great Eastern Earthquake hit Japan. At the time, he was working for a car insurance company in Tokyo, and he still remembers the desolation of the days following the disaster: empty train stations, supermarkets and convenience stores running out of food, mothers rushing to buy whatever was left. He felt a strong sense of insecurity and started to think about the precarity of life in modern society, in particular on fundamental aspects such as food security. The next year Jiro visited a friend living in Nagano, and decided to relocate there. He started to work for a local NPO running an organic farm with the help of disabled people. He greatly enjoyed farming and decided to learn more about organic agriculture. He moved to a village in Saku municipality, a popular area among organic farmers, and after training for two years finally started his own farm.

Jiro's story is an example of how Japan's 3/11 triple disaster influenced some individuals in their choice to relocate in the countryside. Jiro's biography is also significant for an aspect that I found to be relatively common among other new farmers I met: a period of life moving from job to job without a clear idea of what to do in life. Some of them described themselves as ex-*furitā* (freeters). Klien (2020) tells the stories of urban-rural migrants with a similar background. It seems that for some youth rejecting traditional career-life course paths, pro-rural migration appears as an opportunity for self-realisation. This was the case for Jiro, who is now very happy about his job and his new life.

From the examples discussed so far, it appears clear that the choice to relocate from cities into rural regions can vary remarkably from person to person, and that the diverse demographics and background of urban-rural migrants makes it difficult to generalise. Pro-rural migration is a complex phenomenon, and the label 'lifestyle migration' can hardly express such complexity. As Walford and Stockdale's (2016) point out, the term risks being too all-encompassing since almost every life-related aspect (possibly excluding working income) can fall under this label.

Economy and pro-rural migration

As previously mentioned, the rise of pro-rural migration can be interpreted as the effect of specific trends and events. Growing job insecurity in cities has been a major 'push factor' contributing to the phenomenon. Job insecurity is, on the one hand, the result of a long-reaching trend of worsening employment conditions. The increase in irregular (*hiseiki*) forms of employment (part-time, temporary, and dispatched work) since the early 1990s is well documented in the literature. Describing contemporary Japan as an increasingly unequal and dived society, Allison (2013) refers, for instance, to the expanding class of working poors as 'ordinary refugeism'. Especially for young generations, stagnating incomes and precariat in the face of the growing cost of living in major cities represent a disincentive to stay. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, growing job insecurity was largely the consequence of a specific event, the 2008 financial crisis. Odagiri et

al. (2016:43) point out that many people who lost their jobs started to contemplate alternative careers in the countryside.

In the case of agriculture, it is possible to see a correlation between the trend of new entry and economic fluctuation. After a steady increase in the first half of the 2010s, the number of new entry farmers has started to shrink in concomitance with the progressive improvement of the Japanese economy. While the increase of new entrants was certainly also due to the introduction of new financial support measures for new farmers (see Chapter 3), the correlation between the economy and the declining trend of new entry into farming is quite evident. After the peak of 2015, the yearly number of new agricultural entrants has gradually declined, from 65,030 to 58,810 in 2018 (MAFF 2019a). The decline refers to farm successors as well as newly employed farmers and new self-employed farmers from a non-farming background. According to the head of the National Chamber of Agriculture (NCA), in the early 2010s, many more people were visiting the office for counselling. 'We couldn't take breaks for lunch. Many unemployed youths were interested in agriculture, but the economy has recovered, and these days in large cities it's hard to find people willing to work part-time for less than 1500yen/hour. Agriculture is not appealing in terms of income and many people are finding employment in other industries.' The directors of JA Ueda Farm and the head of Nagano prefecture agricultural promotion centre also concurred that the number of applications from aspiring trainees had declined and that this was largely due to improvements in the economy. The yearly event organised by Nagano prefecture in Tokyo to promote entry into agriculture in September 2018 was quite disappointing. Only 50 visitors participated, and JA Ueda Farm boot only had seven visitors.

Aside from the specific case of agriculture and the effects of the 2008 financial crisis, there is arguably a link between employment conditions and individual considerations on the opportunity to start a new life in the countryside. According to data collected by the Osaka's branch of Furusato Kaiki, about 20% of visitors are unemployed, and about 10% are part-time or dispatched workers.

Representations of rurality

Together with the decreasing pull of cities, the recent rise of counterurbanisation is also a consequence of increasing appeal exerted by 'the rural'. In Japan, a country characterized by an idealized view of metropolitan areas as sites of career success and self-realization, rural areas have long been associated with a negative image of backwardness. This is especially true for agricultural work, often described as a 3K job (the equivalent of a 3D job in English): *kitanai* (dirty), *kiken* (dangerous), and *kitsui* (tough). To be sure, the countryside has long been romanticised through all sorts of advertisement campaigns. Robertson (1998), and Creighton (1997) describe, for instance, how railroad companies contributed to the creation of a form of 'orientalism' depicting the countryside as an exotic landscape. For Japanese born in metropolitan areas, the image of the *furusato* (the native land) became a nostalgic ideal of what has been lost in contemporary industrialized society. The rural landscape has become a pilgrimage destination for thousands of city dwellers, but, despite their glorification, rural areas remained largely associated with a negative image of backwardness. As Kelly (1990:223) points out, 'that urban imaginations of the countryside oscillate between snobbish condescension and rhapsodizing sentimentality is a recurring theme of nation-states'.

The last decade nevertheless saw a surprising rebirth of the image of rurality among young urbanites along with the proliferation of publications and television programmes on rural living. As for most social phenomena in media-dominated societies, it is difficult to overstate the role that the media fad played in fuelling pro-rural migration in a typical self-reinforcing, self-fulfilling loop. Successful 'I-turn stories' became the favourite topic of magazines and television programmes (Godo 2012:27). Less successful stories did not enjoy the same coverage. Unlike romanticised images of the countryside advertised by tourist agencies and commercials talking to a middle class in search of a break from city life to rediscover cultural heritage, traditions, and enjoy leisure activities, the 'new rurality' envisages a permanent move and mobilises different tropes. Based on my review of magazines on rural living, movies, dramas, advertisement material from local

administrations and organisations promoting I-turn, etc, recurring scenes include the small *panyasan* (bread bakery), the refurbished, stylish *ryokan* (traditional inn), the book café built in a forest cabin, the fancy IT office facing the sea, etc. These images often combine urban and rural, modern, and vintage. In a way, they bring the city to the countryside. As Traphagan (2020) points out, individuals and organizations create a new kind of rurality and a rural lifestyle that blends imaginary, conceptual, and material aspects of rusticity and cosmopolitanism, contributing to an ongoing process of socio-spatial depolarization of the urban and rural.

I-Turn promotion pamphlet – Kyoto prefecture.

According to Klien (2015; 2020), the countryside or country lifestyle is not a key incentive for urban-rural migrants. Her interviewees, mostly entrepreneurs and social workers, instead saw

the countryside as 'the ideal setting for self-growth, challenge, and furthering their career goals' (2020:2). New entry farmers I met on fieldwork also emphasised that their reason for relocating was agriculture rather than rural living per se, but employees from organisations promoting I-turn had a different view. According to statistics based on data from 2,130 visitors to Furusato Kaiki (Osaka's branch) in 2017, the top three priorities for aspiring migrants were natural-landscape features (27%), weather (15%), and availability of jobs (14%). According to the responsible person, many people have a stereotyped image of rural living and want to live in places with beautiful scenery. 'Visitors usually have specific ideas about the kind of landscape they want.' Farming villages are the most popular (30%), followed by mountain villages (25%), small cities (17%), and fishing villages (13%). According to statistics collected by Kyoto prefecture migration centre, top priorities for aspiring urban-rural migrants are the possibility to spend time in nature and engage in agriculture or forestry activities, followed by the convenience of commuting, a good child-raising environment, and a history amd culture-rich environment. As the responsible person told me, most people would like to have at least a vegetable garden and search for houses with a bit of land. Although data from counselling organisations only refers to 'potential migrants', a group which composition does not necessarily reflect that of those who ultimately move, representations of rurality seem to be an important element in generating interest in rural living among urbanites.

More than 'rurality,' many urban-rural migrants would like to achieve a greater connection with nature. The possibility to work with-in nature is what makes agriculture appealing for many new entry farmers (NCA 2017:22), an aspect highlighted by all my interviewees. 'Nature' is not the same as 'rurality' or 'agriculture,' but what all these 'things' have in common is that they exist primarily as representations for many urban residents. According to the head of Kyoto Agriculture Job Cafe,[53] many people interested in agriculture have never actually touched the soil before. 'We recommend some actual farming experience first of all. It can even be a short farm stay, but they

[53] A public office that helps people find jobs in agriculture.

need to try and see if they might actually like it.' The head of Nagano prefecture consultation centre for agriculture claimed that some aspiring farmers have a very edulcorated idea of agriculture. 'This kind of people often quit as soon as they see the mismatch with reality.'

As previously mentioned, for new entry farmers I met, the focus was on agriculture rather than on rural living. Fuki and Tetsuya came to Nagano so that they could become grape farmers, not because they wanted to get away from the city or because they wanted to live in a small rural town. Shibuya went back to Saitama every other weekend to meet his wife and was very happy to return to the city. Many aspiring farmers would like to work in agriculture while continuing to enjoy the benefits of urban lifestyles. According to officials from Kyoto prefecture agricultural consultation centre, many aspiring farmers would like to live in Kyoto city and commute to fields nearby. Kameoka city is very popular among new entrants from Kansai because of its proximity to Osaka and Kyoto. Even aspiring migrants specifically seeking 'the rural', do not necessarily reject the city. According to the official of Furusato Kaiki, many aspiring migrants would like to relocate in municipalities with a rural 'look', yet with easy access to metropolitan areas. Only a tiny minority of the new settlers I met expressed aversion for city life. As Halfacree (2007; 2012) points out, anti-urbanism seems not to be a prevalent aspect of contemporary pro-rural migration. Presenting the case of pro-rural migrants engaging in organic agriculture, Rosenberger (2014; 2017) too argues that, while resisting certain aspects of capitalist society, urban-rural migrants are not 'anti-society' or willing to 'drop out'. Unlike the older generation of 'orthodox' organic farmers, today they are more flexible, less ideological, and more aware of the need to market their products. This was the case for all organic farmers I met on fieldwork.

Fitting into the rural society

The countryside exerts an appeal, but urbanites are aware of the potential downsides of living in more or less rural communities. The comprehensive network of support for new rural settlers, as well as the vast amount of information today available online, have sensibly ameliorated

the so-called 'three hurdles' of urban-rural migration: community life, housing, and employment (Odagiri et al. 2016:13). Aspiring migrants can, for instance, learn about towns and regions known for being friendly toward newcomers and various forms of support available. At the same time, for people born and raised in cities, adapting to the new environment remains challenging. Lack of convenience and entertainment are not the only issues. For instance, while praising small communities for their safety and other benefits connected to childcare, young parents or couples tend to be worried about children's education in rural areas.[54] People are also anxious about the constraints and nuisances involved in interpersonal relationships in small communities. For individuals accustomed to individualism of the metropolis, it can be challenging to withstand unwanted social mingling and what is often perceived as intrusive behaviour. New farmers indicate interpersonal relationships as one of the most problematic lifestyle aspects (NCA 2017:59). 'Here, people still regularly meet at the *kōminkan* (local community centre).[55] I'm not cut for this kind of things.' Honjo san told me. Some new farmers mentioned the intrusiveness of landowners often showing up at the field and lecturing them. 'They think it's their right and their duty to teach you. I'm grateful for the help, but sometimes I feel I am not free to make my own choices and mistakes.'[56]

Together with (and oppositely to) excessive social meddling, another problem is the closed attitude of local residents toward outsiders, especially in small communities. Fitting into rural society is probably the most significant challenge for new settlers. Many trainees from cities at JA Ueda Farm described Tōmi as quite 'closed' (*heisa-teki*). For Hikaru, a 49 year old trainee from Tokyo, it was difficult to adapt to rural life. 'After all, Japan is still a hamlet society (*mura shakai*)' he told me. 'People are nice, but they are a bit gloomy.' Rural communities are often described in the literature as distrusting of outsiders (e.g. Odagiri and Tsutsui 2016:54). 'People don't know you, and in the beginning, are very suspicious. It's up to you to prove to them that they can trust you',

[54] Interview with the official of Furusato Kaiki, Osaka's branch.
[55] A place where local residents gather to discuss various issues related to the community.
[56] Interview with a new entry farmer in Tōmi.

explained an official of Tōmi local government. The sceptical attitude of many rural dwellers initially represents an obstacle for new agricultural entrants, who have to prove themselves before the community. After many years counselling aspiring farmers, the responsible person at Kyoto Agriculture Job Cafe starts her 'lectures' from socialisation issues: 'The most important thing is being accepted by the community, more important than farming skills or marketing skills. Greeting and smiling are key. These days young urbanites don't greet anymore. If you start like that, of course, no one will help you. Talking to children is also important; people in rural areas appreciate this sort of thing.'

According to many functionaries in organisations related to new entry in agriculture, there are many young urbanites with 'poor social skills' (*ningen kankei ga nigate*) that consider agriculture as a career option. 'They imagine farming as a solitary endeavour and think that it might suit them more than working in a company office, and this is a big mistake' the head of Nagano's consultation centre for agriculture told me. 'Fitting into rural society is the prerequisite of farming and involves a good dose of social skills and effort. Many of these young folks soon realise that there is much more social mingling involved in farming that they initially thought. This includes keeping good relations with the landowner, the neighbour farmers, the home neighbours, JA, people at the city hall, etc.' The issue of people 'with poor social skills' is not exclusive of new entry farmers and was also mentioned by the responsible person at Furusato Kaiki. 'I've heard some cases of local residents bad-mouthing new settlers and calling them weirdos.' she told me. Then, laughing, she added that, indeed, many 'weird people' (*kawatta hito*) visit the office. 'Many people talk too much or don't talk at all.'

Oda kun was a second-year trainee at JA Ueda Farm. Twenty-eight years old, born and raised in Tokyo, Oda kun is quite an eccentric character. He always wore a one-piece red suit and rode a showy red k-truck. On the passenger seat was a large pillow portraying a female anime character. He would alternate long moments of silence with times of unstoppable talking. After high school, he repeatedly tried to get into college in Tokyo, but failed for three years in a row,

becoming a *ronin*. He decided to move to Ueda, where his parents bought a second house. He thought that the countryside could be good for him as the crowded trains of Tokyo were starting to make him sick. He got into Nagano University in Ueda, but he did not make friends and, after graduation, failed all his job interviews. He liked wine and began to think he could become a wine farmer. After working part-time in the shop of a local winery, he applied to JA Ueda Farm programme and began his training in 2017. In his second year, he had already planted grape trees in a field on his family property and also secured a large apple orchard from JA Ueda Farm. His parents were going to help him to manage the farm and sustain him financially to build a small winery. Oda kun was, in many ways, the 'black sheep' of the trainee cohort. Some trainees picked on him for the fact that his family is wealthy and that he graduated from a good university. JA employees referred to him and addressed him as Oda-kun (*kun* is a somehow patronising suffix), unlike other trainees. A couple of senior part-time workers often made fun of him, in his presence or in his absence. 'Will he make it in time with the treatments? His orchard looks like a jungle! The other day he was arguing with Koizumi san over trimming!' The problem, the way they saw it, was that Oda kun will never be a good farmer because he is stubborn, spoiled, and socially awkward. They claimed it would ultimately be up to his parents whether he will be able to succeed in agriculture. This was also the opinion of the director of JA Farm, who thought his parents were going to be the ones actually in charge of the farm. Oda kun perfectly fits the stereotype of the young urbanite with 'poor social skills' considering agriculture as a better option than working for a company. These were precisely the words used by Oda kun: 'I'm not good at interpersonal relationships, so I'm not cut for corporate life.'

Oda kun might be a bit eccentric, but he is by no means an unfriendly or intractable person. He is open to advice, takes jokes well, and truly enjoys farming. I believe managing his own farm and taking pride in what he does will help him become a more confident and social person. At the same time, it easy to imagine that introverted or eccentric people like Oda kun might have a difficult time fitting into rural communities. Urban-rural migration inevitably turns out to be

unsuccessful for some people. There are no statistics available, but on fieldwork, I heard of some cases of people quitting and returning to the city (or moving elsewhere). According to the head of Nagano prefecture consultation centre for agriculture, most new entry farmers quit because farm work turns out to be too tough. Some people cannot withstand long, cold winters. In the case of couples, it happens that female partners have difficulties making friends and want to go back to the city. One of my interviewees, a thirty-four year old man from Tokyo, had moved to three different villages before finding the right place where to settle down. He said people in the previous villages were quite close and unfriendly, so he continued to move.

Life in the countryside: working in nature, working with nature

How about those who decide to stay? Are they ultimately able to improve their lifestyles in the way they envisioned? As Klien (2020) points out, for many people a new life in the countryside does not necessarily lead to a better life-work balance, and many entrepreneurs 'are ultimately so immersed in their work that little time is left in their tight schedules for reflection and leisure' (20). Some of the new entry farmers I met conceded that their life had become busier since they started their farm. However, despite long working hours in the fields and the impossibility of taking holidays during the farming season, most participants claimed that farm work was overall more enjoyable and satisfying than their previous job. This was certainly the case for trainees at JA Ueda Farm. Shibuya described farm work as stress-free and 'human-like' (*ningen-teki*). Fuki and Tetsuya agreed that physically demanding work was largely compensated by a healthier lifestyle and the enjoyment of spending time outdoors. 'The first year I felt reborn. I became again aware of my body and the world outside.' Tetsuya told me. Many other participants emphasised the enjoyment of feeling physically tired rather than mentally exhausted.

For people from cities who have never experienced working on the land, agricultural training is an exciting journey. Farming develops unique attentiveness; to seasonal change, weather, soil, and living things. Through farming, one learns to know a natural space and place: its soil,

slope, the way the sun hits it, its holes, the points where water stagnates and where it flows, how the wind blows, the weeds that grow. A few meters and soil composition or tillage can change, from sandy to loamy, from rich to poor. The field is part of a larger environment and broader geography. Knowing it means understanding your field better: mountains attracting clouds and influencing winds, the paddy fields above slowly releasing water, the morning mist, the nearby forest hosting animals. Unlike a humanmade environment, nature is a complex of life and movements. In the beginning, new farmers keep checking temperature and weather forecasts, but after a few years, they begin to develop a sixth sense for climate and its changes. 'It's like attuning yourself to the rhythm or nature'.[57] This also means developing a sense of dependence on nature, a humble sense of powerlessness.

This kind of attentiveness to our natural environment has largely disappeared in modern, urban societies. Discovering it for the first time is a thrilling experience. Trainees must learn to observe their surroundings because observation and knowledge are at the base of action. Farming is based on an instrumental relation whereby we influence nature for our needs. Yet, this requires intellect and creativity. Farming truly is an art of place-making in which movement and sentience serve as modes of attunement with our surroundings. Attention (to tools, materials, and richly structured environments) lies at the core of processes of enskillment. To learn a skill is not just to learn a set of movements/gestures but also to learn how to perceive (Gieser 2014). Dexterity relies on forms of perception such as proprioception, kinesthetics, and balance (Downey 2009). Pruning trees is by far my favourite, an absorbing, stimulating activity. The point where you cut a branch will influence its future growth. The way you cut branches in a system will influence how the whole tree will develop. While holding scissors in your hand, you're constantly thinking, imagining what it will be of that branch and those around it and those originating from it in one, two, three years. That branch has an upward angle, but it has enough sprouts, so the weight of fruits next year will probably bend it just enough. This branch is needed but will shade the one below it, so better to

[57] Interview with a 'new entry' farmer (8th year into farm management) in Karuizawa

alter its course. Those branches are too thick relative to the main one, so a few of them should be removed to allow the upper ones to get enough nutrition. It is like building a complex, evolving structure. Like carving a statue, yet you are not shaping an inert substance, but a living organism.

Pruning is a delicate work of balance. It might well be the most enjoyable part of fruit farming if it was not for the fact that, at least in Nagano prefecture, work takes place in the freezing winter. I still remember a painfully cold day spent pruning grape wines. It was the first week of February. The temperature remained below zero for the entire day, and a glacial wind from the West lashed our faces. No matter how many layers of clothing or how thick the gloves, the wind felt like daggers cutting through your skin. Summer can be as harsh as winter. The summer of 2018 was one of the hottest ever recorded in Japan, and in July the same orchard had turned into a tropical forest populated by swarms of mosquitos. I had to work on my knees because the trellis covering the field stood at 180cm from the ground level.[58] On those days I remember wondering why someone would choose to work like that.

Farming is not just discovery and wonder. Those tend to fade away after a few years. On the contrary, fatigue, cold, heat, and mosquitoes never go away. My landlord would laugh and say 'It's a tough life! I would never ever become a farmer'. He is the heir of a farming family, but never got involved in agriculture (his uncle takes care of the family paddy). Agriculture is unforgiving. One must work all day long and cannot take days off during the busy farming season, which for most crops stretches from March to December. For new entrants, the impossibility of taking holidays and physically demanding work represent the most problematic lifestyle aspects of running a farm (NCA 2017:59). Most people are not used to physical work, and at JA Ueda Farm, trainees were very tired after a day outside in the fields. There were days when we barely spoke during lunch break. Not only is farming physically demanding, but it is also dangerous and involves a good amount of repetitive work. Not for nothing is agriculture is known in Japan as a 3K (3D) job. Most

[58] Table grape in Japan is exclusively grown on a horizontal trellis. These were planted several decades earlier by farmers based on their height.

of my interviewees had only been working in agriculture for a few years, and one might legitimately argue that dissatisfaction and distress might not arise immediately. Similar objections can be made about life in the countryside. This was the case for Megumi, who became a farmer nine years before we met, at the age of 43. Originally from Tokyo, single, she greatly enjoyed farming and rural living, but, as years passed, she grew increasingly tired of both. 'In the early years everything was new and fun, now it's just work.'

To be sure, the way one perceives her life, work, and overall life quality depends on countless factors, including place of relocation, age, gender, marital and financial status. Another significant distinction is that between employed and self-employed individuals. Self-employed farmers are possibly more motivated than their employed counterparts, but also more exposed to stress and overworking. In the case of agriculture, the type of cultivation and business model of choice greatly impact aspects such as physical and mental fatigue. Many new entry farmers aim for part-time solutions precisely to avoid the pitfalls of overwork in the fields, as further discussed in Chapter 5. Despite undeniable fatigue, trainees at JA Ueda Farm were generally happy about physical work. 'I like feeling tired at the end of the day. It is a different, better type of fatigue than that of when I was sitting at a desk all day.' Even older trainees were not complaining and would often make jokes about becoming fit. They were well aware that age is a significant element to consider when starting a farming business. There is a significant difference between new entrants in their early 30s and, say, in their late 40s. It is not just a matter of fitness at the time of entry, but also about the number of 'fit years' ahead. On the other hand, older new entrants are often better off economically and can make up for their relative lack of physical fitness with capital availability, as well as experience and networks from their previous careers. The fact that agriculture is so physically demanding induces many new entrants to choose business models that allow them to spend less time on the field and focus on activities that can increase the added value of produce discussed in Chapter 7, such as processing and marketing. No matter how marketing-centred a business model is, however, physical work is at least initially required. Aspiring wine farmers at JA Ueda Farm, for instance, had to learn

how to grow broccoli as this was going to be their primary source of income for the following three to four years, until vineyards became productive. The path toward one's goal is inevitably full of obstacles and compromises.

Agricultural work has pros and cons, but for urbanites dissatisfied with extended office hours and sedentary life, working outdoors and 'setting their body in motion' (*karada o ugokasu*) can be sources of great enjoyment. At least initially, the newly achieved lifestyle compensates for physical fatigue and lower income. As Halfacree and Rivera (2011) point out, nature's confusing forces play a central role in the experiences of pro-rural migration. Affect, emotions, and actions brought about through engagement with rural materiality (Blackman and Venn 2010), animals (Jones 2003), plants (Jones and Cloke 2002), inanimate objects and physical forces (Ingold 2008), and the 'push of life' (Anderson and Harrison 2010:16) leave issues of representation to refocus on being existentially and sensuously in the rural.

Pro-rural migration and rural revitalisation

The recent rise of counterurbanisation is undoubtedly a welcome trend for many prefectures and municipalities struggling with depopulation and population ageing. Success stories popularised by media like Okinoshima Island in Shimane prefecture became an example of rural revitalisation based on attracting new settlers from the city.[59] Many municipalities set up I-turn support divisions and invested in advertising campaigns, but to what extent rural regions can benefit from pro-rural migration remains open to debate.

Much has been written on the revitalisation of rural communities in Japan. Names and catchphrases have changed (e.g *machi-zukuri, kasseika, chiiki okoshi, chihō sōsei*), but key challenges remain largely the same. The so-called 'rural depopulation problem' (*kaso mondai*) started to be discussed in Japan in the late 1960s. This is when the term *kaso chiiki* (depopulated

[59] See Nagatomo (2016) or Klien (2015). Okinoshima is a remote island with a population of about 2,000 residents that managed to attract almost 400 migrants in less than ten years.

region) was coined to indicate areas afflicted by massive population loss due to outmigration. Half-century later, rural regions all over Japan continue to suffer from sustained population shrinkage and ageing, and roughly half of all municipalities are today classified as *kaso chiiki* (Sōmushō 2018a). New expressions and catchphrases such as *genkai shūraku* (liminal village) and *chihō shōmetsu* (the disappearance of the regions) have been popularised by the media.[60] While a large share of the research community concurs in predicting a bleak future for many regions, concepts like *genkai shūraku* and *chihō shōmetsu* have been criticised by agrarian and rural studies scholars for their unconditionality and implicit dismissal of local initiatives (Odagiri 2015; Okada 2015). As a matter of fact, many studies on rural communities tend to be based on a few structural indicators and do not take into account the fact that cases of total village dissolution are still extremely rare (Manzenreiter et al. 2020:3), many out-migrants remain in the region and keep contacts with their home village (Sakuma 1999; Özşen and Tokuno 2008), and quality-of-life indicators point to a not so dire situation for many communities (Manzenreiter 2018).

While the future of regional Japan remains far from certain, it is at the same time difficult to ignore consistent demographic trends. In the past half-century, local administrations adopted recurring formulas in order to prevent outmigration and economic decline, mostly by focusing on the creation of jobs.[61] Municipalities heavily relied on public works and urban development to stimulate their economies, often with detrimental effects in the long-term (Kitano 2009). Public works have drastically contracted since the 1990s following budgetary cuts from the central government, but even today, urban development remains a widespread stratagem for many municipalities to stimulate their economies, as further discussed in Chapter 4. Revitalisation

[60] The term *genkai shūraku* was popularised in 2005 and indicates settlements where more than half of the population is aged 65 or older, which suggests its likely disappearance. *Chihō shōmetsu* is the title of a much-discussed 2014 report promoted by Japan Policy Council and former Minister of Public Management Hiroya Masuda. The report predicted that approximately half of all Japanese local municipalities will disappear within this century if no immediate countermeasures are taken.

[61] Different strategies and their success depend on starting conditions, resources, and other elements such as a strong local leadership.

attempts also focused on the development of tourism and on 'village branding' strategies such as the 'one village-one product movement' (*isson ippin undō*), whereby different municipalities tried to secure a spot in regional speciality niche markets. These attempts have been at times successful, but generally insufficient to secure sustained economic development. As Knight (1994) points out, many rural municipalities could not prosper from tourism as it was not on a scale providing the kind of employment base necessary to retain the youthful population. Similarly, with nearly every town and village competing for attention, speciality products could hardly generate sufficient wealth.

Since the 1990s, regional decentralization reforms leading to budgetary cuts from the central government have put additional pressure on rural regions. The process was accompanied by rhetoric emphasising regional autonomy and self-initiative. Especially in the case of rural villages, the revitalisation discourse increasingly focused on mobilising local dwellers to put to good use their unique identities and resources. As Love (2013:112) argues, this appeared as an attempt to 'convert legacies of marginalization into celebrations of cultural diversity as a way of shifting responsibility for the future of the depleted countryside onto its inhabitants.'

Together with preventing out-migration, promoting in-migration has become an important element of regional revitalisation policy, especially following the rise of pro-rural migration. While economic and occupational aspects remain central, the focus has gradually shifted from job creation to greater importance placed on communities' livelihood, an aspect particularly valued by migrants from the city. Attracting I-turners is not easy. Odagiri et al. (2016:24) suggest that rural municipalities should make an effort to 'polish' themselves (*chiiki-migaki*) in order to become more attractive and trigger a virtuous circle whereby new settlers, communicating their positive experiences, will attract more people and induce more youth to stay. Regions, towns, and villages that first built a reputation as 'I-turn hubs' clearly have a competitive advantage. According to the head of Kyoto prefecture migration centre, municipalities known for having a community of I-turners are the most popular.

The quest for attracting new settlers inevitably takes the form of competition similar to that for attracting tourists. A starting point for numerous revitalisation efforts based on tourism has been the creation of community 'images,' an idea expressed with the English loan-word '*imēji'*. The image of a community may incorporate a spectrum of the community's unique features such as festivals, historical sites, speciality products, scenic spots, etc. Things as disparate as the number of 'power-spots', the longest wooden bridge, or the oldest apple tree can be a 'village's claim to fame' (Brucklacher 1999:168). Every city, town, and village in Japan compete for attention, looking for something setting them apart and making them attractive. As previously mentioned, urban-rural migrants often seek a greater connection with nature. As a result, a ubiquitous feature of all regional towns in Japan is, apparently, a 'thriving nature' ('*shizen ga yutaka'*). Every pamphlet and website I came across promoting I-turn inescapably mentioned this aspect or used it as a slogan. Local festivals (whether new, traditional, revived, or invented) have often been used as ways to make communities more appealing. Not only are festivals an important way for villages to become known and attract interest in the first place, but migrants highly value festivals and sports events as occasions for socialisation.

Similar to tourism promotion, I-turn promotion is often based on the creation of 'images' and the specialisation of services or opportunities offered to new settlers. Nīmi (2016) mentions, for instance, Kamiyama village in Tokushima prefecture, famous for IT companies establishing satellite offices taking advantage of high-speed internet connection; Onan town in Shimane prefecture, now known as Japan's number one 'childcare town'; and Honzan town in Kochi prefecture, a popular destination among organic farmers. According to the head of Kyoto prefecture migration centre, Ayabe city, Nantan city, and Kameoka city are the most popular destinations among urban-rural migrants in the prefecture. Kameoka city is popular among new entry farmers because of its proximity to Kyoto and Osaka, guaranteeing easy access to market outlets. Because of its popularity, it is now extremely difficult to find farmland, and new farmers are progressively settling in neighbouring towns. Ayabe city is far from Kansai metropolitan area and, unlike

Kameoka city, new settlers do not choose it for its convenience. The town became famous thanks to a local writer, Naoki Shiomi, the above-mentioned author of *Han-nō Han-X*. In a district of Ayabe called Shigasato, a cluster of new entry farmers following the 'peasant way' has settled to practice small-scale farming and pluriactive lifestyles (McGreevy 2012). A local programme called *kodakara netto* also contributed to attracting new settlers. The programme was launched by a local U-turner worried that the local primary school might introduce combined-aged classes because of the lack of school-age children. Through a combination of financial incentives and advertising, Shigasato succeeded in attracting many young couples with children.

Similar to other revitalisation initiatives, the success of different towns and villages in attracting new settlers depends on initial resources or conditions, the presence or absence of strong local leadership, and the role of influential figures like Naoki Shiomi in the case of Ayabe or Toyō Tamamura in the case of Tōmi. Grassroots movements can also play an important role. For instance, Tanba city and Sasayama city in Hyogo prefecture became popular thanks to the work of NPOs promoting the reform of old houses for I-turners. The 'polishing' process mentioned by Odagiri et al. (2016) also refers to the importance of local administrations to take a positive, proactive attitude. A new entry farmer from Osaka told me that she decided to relocate in Tōmi because, unlike other municipalities she had visited, employees at the city hall were very helpful and motivated. According to a responsible person at Furusato Kaiki, there is a significant difference in the effort expended by prefectures and local administrations to create an environment that is appealing to new settlers. While some prefectures opt for a shared advertising campaign, prefectures like Nagano are characterised by intense competition between municipalities whereby each one emphasises its own distinctive features.[62]

Following the recent rise of pro-rural migration, many local governments have successfully taken advantage of the new trend to attract new settlers. On the other hand, also considering the

[62] Interview with the official of Furusato Kaiki.

magnitude of the phenomenon, this cannot be the case for the vast majority of towns and villages in Japan. Geographically, pro-rural migration is an unevenly shaped phenomenon. As of 2014, the top five destination prefectures (Tottori, Okayama, Gifu, Shimane, and Nagano) absorbed almost half of all migrants (NHK et al. 2015). Migratory flows are mostly directed toward regions and towns with an appealing natural environment, job opportunities, welfare facilities, services, amenities, and a friendly community. Excluding some exceptions, migrants tend not to relocate in depopulated municipalities, which is where they are most needed. On the contrary, the migratory flow toward depopulated municipalities steadily decreased between 2000 and 2015 (Sōmushō 2018b).

Conclusions

Pro-rural migration is a complex phenomenon. The diverse demographics, motives, and background of migrants, together with significant differences characterising rural regions and municipalities, make most generalisations redundant. Different analytical approaches (life course, structural, and behavioural) shed light on different aspects of pro-rural migration. From a macro perspective, it is possible to identify major push-pull factors accounting for the growing number of young urbanites relocating into the countryside in the early 2010s, such as the worsening of the Japanese economy following the financial crisis of 2008. While rurality and country lifestyle are not necessarily the reason why people ultimately decide to move, the growing appeal exerted by 'the rural' following the '*inaka gurashi būmu*' (rural living fad) of the early 2010s also played an important role in disseminating new images of rurality and fueling pro-rural migration.

The choice to relocate from cities into rural areas often springs from the desire to improve certain aspects of one's lifestyle. These are not limited to poor work-life balance and dissatisfaction with corporate working culture, but also include specific welfare-related benefits linked, for instance, to childrearing and healthcare. Life in the countryside also appears as an opportunity for self-realisation for many individuals without a clear idea of what to do in life. While certainly convenient, as Walford and Stockdale (2016) point out, the term 'lifestyle migration' risks being

too all-encompassing, since almost every life-related aspect, possibly excluding working income, falls under this label.

For individuals born and brought up in metropolitan areas, fitting into rural communities can be challenging. Together with the reasons prompting individuals to move, more-than-representational aspects of migration appear important in explaining why people decide to stay. For aspiring farmers from the city, entry in agriculture is an exciting journey. Farm work allows them to experience new forms of embodiment, place-making, and entanglement with other beings in which movement and sentience serve as modes of attunement with our surroundings. As Halfacree and Rivera (2011) point out, nature's confusing forces play a central role in the experiences of pro-rural migration, leaving issues of representation to refocus on being existentially and sensuously in the rural.

Pro-rural migration is a welcome trend for many regions and municipalities confronted with depopulation and population ageing. However, considering the magnitude and distribution of the phenomenon, only a limited number of municipalities are likely to benefit from it. That being said, regardless their number, new settlers often contribute to the revitalisation of their communities and can potentially trigger unforeseen virtuous circles. In many parts of the country, they have also injected new energy into Japan's languishing agricultural sector, the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Japanese agriculture

This Chapter provides an outline of the development of Japanese agriculture since the post-war period and introduces key debates surrounding its reform. Land issues and issues of generational renewal are considered in more detail, providing the background for the remaining chapters.

Representations of agriculture

Japan's cultural identity has long been described as rooted in its agrarian tradition and paddy field agriculture in particular (Gluck 1985:178-185; Schnell 2005). Rice and rice products are at the core of commensality practices, gift exchange, agricultural rituals, national and local festivities and celebration, and offering to the deities and ancestors. Japan's myths are replete with references to rice as deities, and rice is propagated as a symbol of beauty in poems, essays, and visual arts. The notion of rice cultivation in the shaping of Japanese culture and identity has been adopted by numerous influential theorists and is often described as a recurring element of *nihonjinron* literature. As Schnell (2005:210) points out, the role of paddy field agriculture in explaining the Japanese propensity for group behaviour represents a 'key metaphor' in Japanese culture 'conveying the distinctive elements of Japanese social ethos.' Rice agriculture has, for instance, served as an explanation accounting for cultural differences between Japan and 'the West'. Japanese society, developed within the context of irrigated rice cultivation where communities were firmly rooted in place, is juxtaposed to a 'Western society' developed out of the pastoralist subsistence economies of the Middle East and more prone toward mobility and independence

(Ishida 1969, in Schnell 2005:210).[63] Such explanations have enjoyed unusual popularity, and even today are often recounted.[64]

The agrarian roots of the Japanese remain a powerful narrative with vast implications.[65] As discussed in Chapter 2, for Japanese born in metropolitan areas, the agrarian landscape represents the repository of the soul of the country, a nostalgic ideal of what has been lost in contemporary industrialized society. This is in apparent contrast with the way rural areas and agriculture have been long associated with a negative image of backwardness. In recent years, however, along with 'rural living,' farming and agriculture have enjoyed growing popularity among urban residents. Books, magazines, movies, manga, anime, and television programmes on farming proliferated (Osawa 2014). Celebrities dressed in farming attire began to appear on magazines' covers. Suddenly one could see 'Shibuya girls' planting rice seedlings in northern Japan and female idols leading girls farming groups (Agri Journal 31 January 2015; Nōgyō Shinbun 1 March 2019). New farm-themed fashion brands began to appear (Tsuchikau 25 December 2019). The media fad fed itself and ballooned. For the first time, agriculture became 'cool'. Applicants to agricultural departments in universities increased (Toyokeizai 29 August 2018) together with new entry farmers from a non-farming background.[66]

The reasons for the recent agricultural revival largely overlap with those for the growing popularity of rural living discussed in Chapter 2. However, a contributing factor specific to farming was the campaign launched by Japan's former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe promoting agriculture as a new growth-leading industry. In opposition to the allegedly outdated, inefficient, family-based agriculture of the past, the new 'strong agriculture' is business-oriented, corporate, and high-tech.

[63] Numerous scholars have contested the historical significance of rice agriculture. For instance, Tsuboi Hirofumi (1979:88, in Schnell 2005:) demonstrated that dry-field cultivation was at one time equally important, if not more so. Though rice came to predominate in the coastal areas through a combination of political favour and economic policy decisions, a variety of crops including cereal grains, root crops, and tubers continued to be grown.
[64] I heard this kind of story several times on fieldwork.
[65] This idea is often mobilised in times of 'crisis' (e.g. during negotiations of new trade agreements) to justify the need to protect the national agriculture, the rural landscape, and, implicitly, the 'soul of the country.'
[66] Remarkably, the number of women applying to agricultural schools also increased (Hara 2014).

The grim image of the old farmer in the rice field is replaced by cutting edge greenhouses, plant factories, and drones. For the first time, articles dedicated to agriculture started to appear in business magazines. Even in this case, agriculture came to be depicted as something cool and possibly even profitable. Whittaker and Scollay (2017) speak of the emergence of two different narratives surrounding the recent agricultural revival, one centred on environmentalism and alternative food networks, the other on technology and entrepreneurship. While most commentators see the recent trend as new lifeblood for Japan's languishing agricultural sector, critics describe the rhetoric of strong agriculture as a political strategy to advance business interests over those of farmers and agriculture (e.g. Godo 2012, 2014; Hisano 2015; Sekine and Bonanno 2016;). Godo (2014:6) sees, for instance, the recent agricultural fad as a form of escapism in front of Japan's incapacity to rebuild its past prestige, as well as a strategy used by the government to win votes from independent urban voters, to whom the word 'reform' has an attractive ring. He also criticises the media for feeding urban youth with success stories of new entry farmers, concealing the truth of a much more dire reality (Godo 2012:27).

Agriculture has long been a controversial topic in Japan and continues to carry a political significance that far exceeds its economic dimension. The controversy concerns the reform of the declining agricultural sector, characterized by a shrinking farming population, small, fragmented farming units, and heavy reliance on state support. For reform advocates, agriculture is an inefficient industry lacking competitiveness, weighing on consumers and taxpayers. Agricultural support and policy and its legacy, most notably protectionism and overregulation, are described as the home of vested interests and major causes for agricultural decline. Reform opponents contend that agriculture should not be treated like any other industry, but as a unique realm where at stake are the survival of rural communities, environmental conservation, and food security. Trade protection, regulations, and state support are thus seen as indispensable tools to protect the greater national interest.

Agriculture has become the object of a vast literature also due to its political implications. Together with academic scholarship, Japanese bookstores display a surprising number of popular books discussing the agrarian roots of the Japanese people, the philosophy and the ecology of agriculture, the problems of the agricultural sector, food security and food safety, alternative food networks, the changing dietary habits of the Japanese, etc. The recent agricultural revival has further enriched the shelves of bookstores with countless publications on sustainable agriculture, food social media marketing, and manuals on how to establish a successful agribusiness.

One should be careful in approaching popular and academic literature on Japanese agriculture, keeping in mind the variety of theoretical and ideological perspectives and premises from which different accounts are narrated. The same is true for the consistent body of social science literature available in English, which include studies on interest groups and agricultural policy (e.g. George Mulgan 2001, 2006, 2011; Yamashita 2015; Sasada 2015; Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016; Honma and George Mulgan 2018), processes of agrarian transformation (Moore 1990; Jussaume 1991: Hisano et al. 2018), food security (Rosenberger 2009; Honma 2015; Reiher and Yamaguchi 2016; Freiner 2019), food consumption (Vogel 1999; Hisano 2015), farmland issues (McDonald 1997; Godo 2007, Yamashita 2008; Jentzsch 2016, 2017, 2020), farm succession issues (Uchiyama 2014, Wang 2014, Nagatani 2015), corporate agriculture (Godo 2014; Sekine and Bonanno 2016; Jentzsch 2016), hamlet-based collective farms (Jentzsch 2016; Miyake 2016), agri-food chains (Hisano 2015; Sasada 2015; Sekine and Bonanno 2016; Whittaker and Scollay 2019), and alternative food networks (Kondoh 2015; McGreevy 2012), among others. Anthropologists discussed Japanese agriculture in ethnographic studies of farming communities (Moon 1989; Moore 1990; Kelly 1990; Knight 1994; Wood 2012), studies on representations of agrarian tradition (Schnell 2005), and pro-rural migrants (Rosenberger 2014, 2017).

This chapter is structured as follows. After providing an outline of agricultural policy and processes of agrarian transformation from the end of the Second World War, I introduce structural problems of Japanese agriculture with a focus on farmland issues. I then discuss the problem of

generational renewal in agriculture, past policy attempts to address the issue, and difficulties faced by new entry farmers from a non-farming background.

Japanese agriculture and agrarian transformation

In the past half-century, the relative economic importance of agriculture has declined in most industrialized countries, in terms both of GPD and employment shares (OECD 2009). This decline has been especially sharp in Japan. Production volumes, value, and land under cultivation have shrunk, and small, fragmented plots are farmed by a shrinking and ageing workforce. Food self-sufficiency rate, calculated on a calorie basis, dropped from 73% to 39% between 1965 and 2015 (MAFF 2015a).

At the end of the Second World War, land reforms imposed by the American occupation authorities freed Japanese farmers from the old landlord system while maintaining the pre-war structure of smallholding farms. Reforms imposed stringent restrictions on farmland ownership and enshrined the principle of close identity between land ownership and its use (McDonald 1997). In the aftermath of the War, agricultural cooperatives (*nōkyō*) emerged as important actors for the coordination of food collection and distribution, as well as a valuable vehicle for democratization in rural areas (Dore 1959). In 1952, the Ministry of Agriculture authorized the creation of a central organization of agricultural cooperatives (*zenchū*) to coordinate the collection of rice and grains. Although food shortage had disappeared by the early 1950s, the role of agricultural cooperatives continued to grow, encompassing all farmers throughout the country and taking control of most of the economic activities of Japan's farming communities. Agricultural cooperatives are multi-purpose cooperatives also providing banking, insurance, and healthcare services. The multilayer organisation of agricultural cooperatives (local, prefectural, and national) and its different administrative bodies is today known as JA group, or simply as 'JA' (Japan agriculture).

The JA Group, 2015 (Source: JA Group website).

As the vast majority of cooperatives' members were rice farmers, JA lobbying activities became focused on raising the price of rice. This was achieved through successive revisions of the Food Control Law of 1942, which regulated the distribution and price of rice, wheat, and barley (Yamashita 2015). Under this scheme, any surplus of rice was disposed of at the government's expense. The policy purpose of the Food Control Law, initially adopted to protect consumers through an equitable system for the sale of staple products, substantially moved toward one of increasing the price at which the government bought rice from farmers (George Mulgan 2006:124). The Basic Agricultural Law of 1961 also contributed to maintaining high prices by defining the

price and import control policy of food products. The goal of price policies was to correct income disparities between agriculture and other industries, but inflated prices had the effect of discouraging farmers from switching to other crops (George Mulgan 2001; Yamashita 2015). The growing surplus in rice production determined by increased productivity and by the reduction of rice consumption, led in 1970 to the introduction of a new policy of acreage control (*gentan*), whereby farmers received payments to convert paddy fields into different crops, or simply to allow land to lie fallow.

Together with concerns about income disparities, the protection of farmers was also dictated by political opportunism. Japan's electoral system caused rural regions to be overrepresented in the Diet, and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), predominantly a rural-based party, relied on JA as a political platform and as a vote-gathering organization (George Mulgan 2000; 2001). The coalition between the LDP and JA was based on securing the rural vote in exchange for policies supporting farmers. The protection of farming households and in particular of part-time rice farmers always represented a priority for JA, for which a higher number of members meant greater political influence and economic benefits derived from membership fees and the provision of various services: financial services provided by its bank (*nōrinchūkin*), which profited from an increasing number of deposits and loans, insurance plans, the sale of farming equipment, and the marketing of farm products (George Mulgan 2006; Yamashita 2015). At the same time, the Ministry of Agriculture had all the interest to expand the scope of regulations and subsidies in order to reproduce itself as an organisation and maintain its status in the ministries' hierarchy (George Mulgan 2006). The interest coalition between JA, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the LDP is often referred to as the 'agricultural iron triangle.'[67]

Job opportunities in rural areas expanded rapidly in the 1970s. The diffusion of second tier and subcontracting manufacturing companies, in particular, provided opportunities for farming families

[67] The LDP has near continuously been in power since its foundation in 1955, with the exception of a period between 1993 and 1994, and again from 2009 to 2012.

to supplement their farming income and move to part-time farming. As Moore (1990) points out, this pattern of decentralized industrial development allowed the industry to secure cheap, flexible labour in rural areas, while at the same time preventing the rapid demise of the farming population that occurred in Europe and the United States. In the same period, the development of a 'comprehensive agricultural policy' (*sōgō nōsei*) placing greater emphasis on rural development and public works led to a shift in agricultural spending from agriculture to infrastructure under the label of 'multifunctionality.'[68] The expansion of construction works provided additional job-supplementing opportunities in rural areas and further contributed to the consolidation of the part-time farming model. Farming part-time became possible thanks to mechanization, enabling farmers to save labour and engage in off-farm employment. Machinery became increasingly designed to fit the needs of small farming households, while local cooperatives provided collective services for all the operations involved in rice farming, including seeding, planting, harvesting, processing, and marketing (OECD 2009:64).

Overall, the 1970s and the 1980s represented a period of economic prosperity for Japan. The constant transfer of resources from urban to rural areas was tolerated by the wealthy urban middle class, happy to pay higher prices for domestic produce and support farmers. Japanese agriculture remained highly protected and relatively free from pressure to change. Criticism mainly came from the business world, as agricultural protectionism was used by commercial partners as leverage to limit imports from Japan. Trade and foreign pressure have been significant elements in defining Japan's agricultural policy (George Mulgan 2000). Agricultural exporters such as the United States and Australia have been active in lobbying for an opening of the Japanese market, both bilaterally and in multilateral trade settings under the auspices of the GATT and the WTO (George Mulgan 2006:165-209). While bilateral trade negotiations in the 1970s and 1980s led to a limited number of liberalizations, the Uruguay Round of 1993 represented the first comprehensive multilateral

[68] A concept referring to the benefits of agriculture beyond its economic value: landscape preservation, environmental protection, rural employment, and food security.

agreement to liberalise agricultural trade. Japan accepted to end quotas on several products, and agricultural support prices were gradually lowered. However, trade liberalisation did not result in a comprehensive import expansion as key products such as rice, wheat, barley, and dairy products remained protected by tariffs and secondary duties (George Mulgan 2006:223). At the same time, lower trade protection was largely compensated by an increase in direct payments.

Trade liberalisations in the 1990s were concomitant to a significant cut of the budget for public construction works in rural regions following a series of media reports on the dissipation of public funds (Godo 2007).[69] The reduction of public works, together with the disappearance of numerous second-tier and subcontracting manufacturing companies starting in the 1980s, led to a situation whereby many farmers and their heirs became unable to supplement their income. The part-time survival strategy upon which much of Japanese agriculture was built became increasingly unviable. With most farms still small and unprofitable, more and more farm successors opted for a career in the city.

From the 2000s, agricultural policy has been characterized by progressive attempts to redirect subsidies towards certified core farmers progressively. Lowering the support to smallholdings is certainly an unpopular decision, as demonstrated by the backlash in rural areas in the 2007 elections. The progressive withdrawal of state support toward smallholdings can be interpreted as the result of the weakening political coalition between JA and the LDP, determined by the reduced weight of the rural vote following the electoral reform of 1994, the increasing importance of swing voters, and the 2006 revision of the political campaign law (Sasada 2015). As Maclachlan and Shimizu (2016) point out, weakening ties between the LDP and JA also depends on farmers and their relations with JA. Worried about the cost-ineffectiveness of an overreliance on JA, many full-time farmers are in fact distancing themselves from JA's network in pursuit of more profit-maximising business models.

[69] The term 'construction state' has been used to refer to a system of collusion between politicians, bureaucrats, and businesspeople, leading to massive government spending on public works projects (McCormack 1995).

Even the urban residents are today less prone to support farmers as they were until a few decades ago. Japanese consumers have long considered efficiency gains derived by import liberalization or deregulation as less important than long-term social and environmental benefits derived from the protection of the national industry (Vogel 1999). Not only did consumers and consumer groups support agricultural protection throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, but they also resisted retail deregulation in order to protect small retailers. Consumer groups' long allegiance with environmentalists, retailers, farmers, and housewives 'is not simply a matter of reciprocal alliances but also one of identity' (Vogel 1999: 61). They see 'weak' groups such as small retailers or farmers as their allies and 'strong' groups such as big businesses and foreign governments as their adversaries. This, however, might no longer be the case. While surveys confirm that the Japanese continue to prefer expensive, domestically produced agricultural products because they value perceived higher safety and quality more than price (Hisano 2015), according to a survey conducted by the Yomiuri Shinbun in June 2014, more respondents (43%) approved of TPP than opposed it (35%).[70] As Maclachlan and Shimizu (2016:456) point out, these numbers suggest that consumers in today's struggling economy prioritize Japanese corporate access to foreign markets through freer trade over the fate of domestic producers.

The crack between the LDP and JA became even more evident under the administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who supported Japan's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a commitment inevitably resulting in the removal of tariffs, and promoted a new model of corporate, export-oriented agriculture as part of his strategy to revitalise the Japanese economy. In 2014, the confrontation culminated with a series of recommendations for the reform of JA group, identified by many as the primary obstacle to the reform of agriculture. The proposal included the removal of JA's required membership fees, the loss of *Zenchū*'s supervisory functions, and the limitation of JA services to regular members (i.e. farmers). The goal was to shift JA activity

[70] 47% stated that TPP would have a bad influence on domestic producers. 39% who thought the influence would be positive.

towards agriculture, weaken its political and financial power, and allow individual cooperatives to act independently. Most of the recommendations were deferred, but in 2015 *Zenchū* accepted losing some of its coordination functions, allowing local cooperatives to choose whether or not to be audited. Agricultural cooperatives were also induced to implement a package of self-reforms to be assessed by core farmers, including the reduction of the cost of farming inputs and the expansion of direct sales (sales out of the wholesale market circuit) (NRI 2018a). While JA reforms are seen by many as an opportunity to finally revitalise Japanese agriculture, critics emphasise risks associated with the agenda promoted by the government. Sekine and Bonanno (2016:57) see recent liberalisations, deregulation, and the attack on JA as part of the neoliberal agenda to subsume land and food production to capital. For Godo (2016), the demonization of JA went hand in hand with the formation of a new iron triangle of agricultural (corporate) interests captained by Japan Business Federation (*Keidanren*). For Takahashi (2017), the attack on JA to dissolve multi-purpose cooperative will result in the disappearance of the last safety net for millions of rural dwellers.

Structural problems in Japanese agriculture

Japanese producers incur high production costs primarily due to inefficiencies springing from farmland fragmentation and the scarcity of labour. Labour shortage represents a significant obstacle to farm expansion and crop specialisation. Many of the farmers I met on fieldwork emphasised difficulties securing a sufficient workforce in busy periods such as harvesting. Unlike most industrialized countries, Japan does not heavily rely on cheap foreign labour for its food production. Japan's infamous 'trainee system' only brings a limited number of foreign workers to Japanese farms.[71] Not only is their number insufficient to fulfil the industry's demand, but their wage cost is said to be relatively high (Ando and Horiguchi 2013).

[71] The system allows foreign workers to stay in Japan for a limited period of time as 'trainees.' These workers, mostly from south-east Asia, have no right to apply for permanent residence or for a working visa.

Before discussing farmland issues, another factor worth mentioning is the high cost of farming inputs. Already in the late 1960s, despite the high degree of mechanization reached by Japanese farms and the consequent high productivity, the increasing cost of inputs began to slow down farm income growth (Fukutake 1989:93). According to a survey conducted by Japan Agricultural Corporations Association (2016), in Japan, fertilizers and pesticides cost two times and three times more, respectively, than in South Korea. The price of machinery and basic farming appliances is also high by international standards (Nikkei Weekly 24 September 2012). *Zennō*, JA's division responsible for the marketing of farming materials and farm products, is said to be the major responsible for this anomaly. JA is Japan's foremost distributor of production materials, occupying over 70% of the market share for fertilizers, 60% of the share of agricultural chemicals, and 50% of farming machinery (Yamashita 2015). Since the post-war period, JA maintained strict control over the market of farming inputs in order to balance the power of oligopolistic manufacturers by centralising purchases. However, according to some commentators, JA's tendency to purchase farming materials at a high price led to higher costs passed on to farmers (Osaki 2016). For a long time, the system remained sustainable thanks to inflated market prices, but shrinking profit margins have made farmers increasingly aware of the necessity to cut production costs, and today many of them find better deals with commercial wholesalers and retailers (Ōnaka 2011). At the same time, the ubiquity of JA in agricultural matters has led to a situation whereby most producers are highly reliant on the organization and find it hard to detach from it. Agricultural cooperatives provide key services in rural areas and it is therefore unwise to antagonize them. Surveys show that reducing the cost of farming inputs is by far the most compelling demand among cooperatives' members (Nōgyō Shinbun 19 October 2016). In 2015, the Government of Japan instituted a special commission in charge of restructuring the industry and the distribution of farming inputs. This should allegedly be achieved by forcing the amalgamation of small producers in order to achieve scale economies and reduce the number of products marketed by JA (Asahi

News 22 November 2016; Nikkei Shinbun 10 July 2016). It remains unclear, however, how these targets will be achieved.

Farmland issues

Farmland fragmentation represents a significant obstacle to efficiency in Japanese agriculture. Much farmland in Japan is scattered in a multitude of small plots within a patchwork of agricultural, residential, and commercial units. The average Japanese farm is tiny by international standards, about one hectare on average (excluding the island of Hokkaido) (MAFF 2015a). Moreover, this figure does not account for the fact that farms are typically fragmented in several small plots, often distant from one another. Although the MAFF soon recognized the need to consolidate land in the hands of professional farmers and expand farm size,[72] reforms never directly tackled the causes of the problem. As previously mentioned, price policies and tax incentives contributed to keeping part-time farmers in agriculture, but most importantly, farmland transfer has been limited by disincentives derived from social norms, poor regulations of farmland use, and ambiguous tenancy rights.

The lack of a rigid zoning system delineating urban areas from agricultural areas has long had the effect of raising farmers' expectations on the possibility of converting farmland for residential or other purposes (Godo 2007; Yamashita 2008). As a consequence, rather than a factor of production, farmland in Japan has long been considered a marketable asset. Especially during the years of economic development, farmland came to be seen as one of the safest, most profitable assets due to expectations of price increases – land prices kept rising because they were expected to rise – and because of Japan's extremely low taxation on farmland (Noguchi 1992). Regulations on land conversion remained lax because the designation of farmland and urban development zones was been left to local governments, which often see urbanisation as a way to stimulate the economy

[72] MAFF Minister Akagi declared in 1964: 'The time has come to reform the farmland system to enable farmers to expand their operations. We should enable a public corporation to buy, sell, and lease farmland for farmers who want to expand their farm size.' Cited in Yamashita (2008:3).

and secure votes (more on Chapter 4). Godo (2007) describes the situation as a lottery whereby landowners try to obtain agriculture-related benefits (agricultural subsidies, farmland improvement investments, and reductions in asset taxes) while waiting to convert their land to other uses. Until the opportunity of farmland conversion presents itself, agricultural committees (*nōgyō īnkai*) often tolerate that farmland is left idle.[73] Because the Agricultural Land Law does not oblige farmers to farm their land, the amount of farmland left idle also began to increase. Of the three million hectares of farmland that Japan lost between 1960 and 2015, about half turned idle, and the other half was converted for residential or industrial use (MAFF 2015a).

Farmland became too expensive for farmers willing to expand their farm, so lease agreements became the prevalent mode of transfer. However, because the Land Act of 1952 protected tenant farmers' rights by restricting the cancellation of lease contracts, landowners feared that they might not be able to reclaim farmland from tenants and became reluctant to lease out (Yamashita 2008). Regulations were relaxed with two revisions of the Land Act in 1970 and 1975, but the idea that tenants might develop ownership rights remained. This is among the reasons why, even today, informal agreements are sometimes preferred to contracts.

Landowners' reluctance to transfer farmland is also linked to social norms and the widespread preference to entrust land to members of the same social group (Jentzsch 2016). Farmland is considered a valuable asset, but also an integral part of the family heritage, which conservation is traditionally part of the duties of single heir household successors (Moore 1990; Uchiyama 2014). The idea that farmland should only be entrusted to a respectable, trustable person has its roots in the condition of interdependence between members of the rural community, often explained through the integrative nature of paddy field agriculture (Moore 1990:271; Iwamoto 2003; Satō and Suehara 2014). Rice farming is based on the shared use of water and traditionally depended on group work during hectic times like transplanting and harvest. These elements made it impossible for any single

[73] Local bodies overseeing farmland matters.

household to act independently, and each maintained reciprocal ties with other households in order to subsist (Schnell 2005). This heritage of interdependence contributes to landowners' reluctance to entrust outsiders of the community with the responsibility of shared works and the care of communal resources. Every farmer is in fact expected to cooperate in the maintenance of ditches and waterways, guarantee the quality of water to the fields downhill, and share the responsibility of abandoned fields causing the spreading of weeds and parasites to the neighbouring fields (Iwamoto 2003; Sarker and Ito 2003).

Landowners' reluctance to lease farmland to outsiders of the community created a situation whereby informal deals based on relationships of mutual trust among kin or neighbours became the dominant mode of farmland exchange (Jentzsch 2016; Shōgenji 2012). Informal transfers have been traditionally managed by agricultural committees and are embedded in local norms regarding the use and maintenance of farmland. So-called 'farmland harmonization groups' (*nōchi enkatsuka dantai*) were instituted in 2009 to regulate this erratic mode of exchange. Under this scheme, landowners would yield farmland under unconditional authority to the harmonization groups, which would then find a lessee. Although this system contradicted the existing mode of transfer rooted in social networks and trust relationships, harmonization groups were administrated by the same actors and organizations responsible for land transfers before their introduction (Jentzsch 2016). This, in turn, resulted in substantial continuity with the previous modality of transfer. Farmers continued to negotiate land exchanges informally and then formalize their deals through the harmonization group in order to access subsidies. A new reform package in 2014 introduced a new public organization responsible for farmland redistribution known as 'farmland intermediary management organization' (*nōchi chūkan kanri kikō*), or simply 'farmland banks.' Similar to harmonization groups, farmland banks request landowners to rent their land under unconditional authority but moved formal authority from the local level to the prefectural level and made the process of farmland allocation public (Jentzsch 2016). The effectiveness of farmland banks is a debated topic. According to the director of an agricultural cooperative in Nagano prefecture, the majority of new lease contracts

signed with farmland banks constitute of old contracts appositely cancelled and re-singed in order to access subsidies. This practice is allegedly tolerated and even encouraged by the MAFF and Japan's government in order to present a better performance of the new organisation.

As previously mentioned, from the early 2000s agricultural policy has been characterized by measures redirecting subsidies toward 'certified farmers' (*nintei nōgyōsha*), a heterogeneous group including household farms, agricultural corporations, and hamlet-based collective farms. The primary goal of this shift was to promote farm enlargement and land consolidation. To become certified, farms must comply with various regulations depending on their juridical form, including a minimum farm size. Certification has become increasingly important in order to access the full array of state provision. This is also the case for new entry farmers, as further discussed in Chapter 5. When state support became increasingly directed at certified farms, the formation of voluntary associations of small farmers known as hamlet-based collective farms (*shūraku einō*) became a loophole for thousands of small rice farmers to remain eligible for subsidies (Jentzsch 2016). While in some cases the formation of hamlet-based collective farms contributed to land consolidation, improved overall efficiency, and prevented land abandonment, in some cases farmers did not alter their farming practices and continued to farm and market their products individually (Miyake 2016: 141). The share of total cultivated land administrated by certified farmers rose from 33% in 2004 to 52.3% in 2016 (MAFF 2017a). However, as Jentzsch (2016) points out, the acclaimed increase of certified farming units continues to conceal the problem of farmland fragmentation.

Generational renewal in agriculture

Agriculture worldwide faces a problem of generational succession. The global farming population is rapidly ageing, and a large number of farmers appear to have no successor (White 2015). In 2013, 29.5% of farm holders in Europe (EU-27) were above 65 years of age (Eurostat 2016). In South Korea and Taiwan, the same year's figure was 31.8% and 31.2%, respectively

(Wang 2014). In Japan, the situation is particularly dire, with 65% of the core farming population above 65 years of age (MAFF 2015a).[74]

Problems related to generational renewal are especially marked in smallholdings countries where the small size of farms makes them unlikely to provide sufficient income and thus appeal to successors (Zagata and Sutherland 2015). This is certainly the case in Japan, where children born into farming families find the prospect of taking over the small family farm unappealing. Not only do many young Japanese not want to live in rural areas because of the allure projected by big cities (Mock 2006), but as previously mentioned the contraction of income-supplementing job opportunities in rural areas made the Japanese part-time farming model increasingly unviable. As a result, farming progressively has become a retirement occupation. Since the 1990s, the term '*teinen kinō*' (retirement farming) started to be used to refer to the growing number of farm heirs taking over the family farm upon retirement, a peculiar mode of entry that significantly contributed to the rapid ageing of Japan's farming population. Retiree farmers currently represent roughly half of all new agricultural entrants (MAFF 2019a).

Already in the 1970s, agricultural policy attempted to address the problem of late entry into farming by introducing economic incentives for farmers' early retirement and heirs' early succession, but these measures produced scarce results (Uchiyama 2014). While the ageing of the farmers is generally considered to be problematic, [75] Takahashi (2016:227) argues that this is not necessarily the case. Retirees might be old, but they are usually energetic and motivated. They have working experience in other industries, and their expertise often proves to be useful in the management of hamlet-based collective farms, the development of local processing businesses, and the creation of new marketing channels.

[74] It is important to be cautious when comparing national statistics. Different countries adopt different definitions of 'farmers' or 'farming population'.

[75] The ageing of the farming population is often associated with decreasing productivity (IMF 2016). Previous studies also show that age has a negative impact on the sustainability of agricultural practices (Comer et al. 1999; Vanslembrouck et al. 2002;), decision-making processes (van Passel et al. 2007), up-take of organic farming (Laepple and Van Rensburg 2011), and the welfare of animals kept on farms (Mann 2005).

Apart from the ageing of small-scale farmers and problems springing from farmland abandonment, the most pressing issue is the shortage of youth willing to farm professionally (i.e. full-time), expand operations, and consolidate farmland. The MAFF refers to these farmers as '*ninaite,*' literally the 'bearers' of the future of Japanese agriculture. Together with measures promoting the new entry of individuals discussed in the next section, since the 2000s, policy attempts to promote participation in agriculture also took the form of deregulations allowing non-agricultural companies to engage in farming. Corporate access to farmland has long been restricted by law, based on the premise that only farmers should be entitled to own farmland to prevent land speculation (McDonald 1997). The entry of non-agricultural companies into farming also raised concerns that corporate management would not be in harmony with that of family farms and might compromise the regional utilisation of farmland and water. Agricultural Production Corporations (APC) were first introduced in legislation in 1962 as the only legal persons allowed to own agricultural land but have long played a minor role in Japanese agriculture. Only in 2000 were joint-stock companies operating in food-related business allowed to participate in APCs under strict conditions. Such conditions have been gradually deregulated, and in 2009, following a revision of the Agricultural Land Act, all joint-stock companies were allowed to participate in APCs with increased shares. As a result, the number of participating APCs increased in the past years, from 1,696 to 4,851 between 2009 and 2017 (MAFF 2017a). Another provision of the 2009 revision of the Agricultural Land Act permits the deregulation of the lease of farmland, an alternative way in which general corporations can engage in farming. Between 2010 and 2016, 1,395 joint-stock companies, 554 NPOs, and 273 limited-liability companies leased farmland under the new system.[76] Despite this encouraging trend, previous studies show that corporate agriculture is not particularly successful. A survey conducted in 2013 by Japan Finance Corporation on 138 companies leasing land under the new system revealed that only 30% of them operated on a budget surplus (JFC

[76] New entrants come from a variety of sectors, primarily livestock companies, food-related companies (processors, wholesalers, retailers), and construction companies (MAFF 2017c).

2013). There are numerous cases of large companies that withdrew from farming operations because of financial losses (Hasegawa 2016). While large food-related companies typically establish/invest in APCs as a long-term strategy to strengthen their control over procurement and achieve market advantages,[77] many companies from other sectors do not establish new farming ventures for their immediate profits, but rather as a marketing strategy, a form of corporate social responsibility, and a buffer for employment (Lollini 2019). Corporate access to farmland remains a controversial topic. While supporters see deregulations as a welcome occurrence potentially ameliorating the problem of lack of farm successors, critics emphasise risks of land grabbing and farmland misuse (Hisano and Sekine 2009; Godo 2014; Sekine and Bonanno 2016).

Farmers from a non-farming background

Together with incentives for farm heirs to take over the family farm at a younger age, efforts to promote generational renewal in agriculture have increasingly focused on attracting individuals from a non-farming background willing to find employment in existing farms or become self-employed. Policy measures in the late 1980s included the institution of a counselling organisation in 1987 (*shinki shūnō gaido jigyō*), a financial support package for new entrants in 1994 (*shūnō shien shikin*), financial aid for returnees and new settlers in 1996 (*U-J-I tān shūnō sokushin taisaku jigyō*), and a farm internship programme in 1999 (*nōgyō intānshippu jigyō*) (Egawa 2016a). Past attempts to attract aspiring farmers from the city have produced mixed results, depending on the conditions offered by local municipalities, agricultural cooperatives, and producers' groups.

That of JA Shibu in Kagoshima prefecture is a well-known success story (Takano et al. 2015:156-163). During the 1960s, Shibu town became known for the greenhouse production of bell peppers. In 1977, the local producers' group counted 100 farmers cultivating 22.5ha of land, but in 1990 the situation was radically different, with only 38 farmers cultivating 7.5ha. In 1996 the

[77] An example is Kagome, which now controls over 40% of the tomato market (Ishida 2015).

municipal government and the local JA decided to establish a scheme to support aspiring self-employed farmers offering a generous allowance of 300,000 yen/month covering two years of training and financial support for accommodation. However, the programme did not work as expected. Many trainees and new farmers quit, complaining that farm income was too low and that farm work during busy months was incompatible with child-rearing. It was thus decided that only couples with a firm resolve, in good health, and with sufficient personal savings would be eligible. The public corporation instituted a pre-training period to screen new candidates, limited the yearly intake to one couple, and reduced financial support only to the first year of training. The new arrangements turned out to be successful, and no one quit as of 2014. In the same year, production levels and farmed area outpaced 1970s levels. I-turners came to represent over 70% of members of the local bell peppers (*piman*) production group.[78] They introduced modern farming techniques, established new marketing routes, and contributed to the revitalisation of the local community.[79]

The favouring of couples over singles is a recurring element of many training schemes mentioned in previous studies.[80] Most people I met in organisations related to agriculture emphasised that farming is easier for couples than for singles and that this is one of the reasons why couples are less likely to quit. According to the head of Ueda consultation centre for agriculture, although female partners do not necessarily work full-time at the farm (they typically have a part-time job or are busy with child raising), they can help on busy periods and provide moral support. According to the head of the agricultural office in Tōmi too, the possibility of relying on a partner in busy periods when it is difficult to find part-time workers makes a huge difference. Aside from the specific case of agriculture, rural municipalities see couples, and especially couples with

[78] Producers' groups (*senmon bukai*) are crop-specific groups created by cooperatives' members.
[79] The public corporation makes sure that trainees can lease land to build a 30a greenhouse after the end of the training period. In order to build a greenhouse, in addition to the financial support provided, new entrants need to invest 12-15 million yen (about £70,000), which local JA can lend. JA provides fertilisers and pesticides and collects 100% of the production, working to avoid 'wild price fluctuation' (*rankōge*).
[80] Another example is, for instance, that of JA Aizu Yotsuba in Fukushima Prefecture, a cooperative specialised on indoor tomatoes that started to accept I-turner couples since 2001 taking advantage of the popularity of the nearby sky area (Izumi 2018:17-21).

children, as more likely to fit into the community and contribute to revitalisation, and thus tend to prioritise them.

Many different elements contributed to the success, and more often the failure, of different training programmes and financial support schemes. To be sure, the number of such initiatives has progressively increased all over Japan as the farming crisis worsened. Knight (2003) briefly refers to the attempts by prefectural and municipal governments to promote participation in agriculture in the late 1990s:

> Regional authorities have launched advertising campaigns (posters in Tokyo subway, print adverts, television commercials, etc.) exhorting migrants from the regions to returns to their rural hometowns, while some rural municipalities offer monetary incentives to encourage return migration. In addition, unrelated outsiders willing to take up farming have been actively recruited by remote municipalities. Some prefectures have established offices in metropolitan areas to field enquiries from would-be rural settlers and have set up assistance and training programmes to attract new farmers to rural areas. (Knight 2003:28)

The above description is surprisingly evocative of the current situation. Not much seems to have changed in the past twenty years. However, not only has the number of training opportunities and the number and budget of financial support schemes increased dramatically, but, even more importantly, the recent agricultural revival sparked interest in farming among urban residents as never before. Despite various attempts to promote participation in agriculture, the number of new entrants from a non-farming background remained low throughout the 1990s and the 2000s. This is true for both employed farmers (*shinki koyō shūnōsha*) and self-employed farmers (*shinki sannyū shūnōsha*). The trend only started to change in the early 2010s, following the effects of 2008 financial crisis, the introduction of new national financial support measures, and the media fad surrounding agriculture. Between 2010 and 2016, the annual number of newly employed farmers

and new self-employed farmers saw an average increase of 5.03% (10,680 in 2016) and 9.26% (3,440 in 2016), respectively (MAFF 2019a). In both groups, individuals from a non-farming background were the majority, and most of them were under 49 years of age. The growing number of new entry farmers from a non-farming background was concomitant with a reduction of the number of farm successors following the end of the baby boomers' retirement wave (Egawa 2016a). As a result, for the first time in 2016, newly employed and new self-employed farmers combined came to represent half of all new entrants under 49 years of age (MAFF 2019a).[81]

New measures introduced to promote new entry into farming include a subsidy package established in 2009 for farms or agricultural corporations hiring young individuals (*nōgyō koyō kaizen suishin jigyō*) and a financial support scheme established in 2012 for aspiring self-employed farmers under 45 years of age (*seinen shūnō kyūfukin* – renamed *seinentō shūnō shikin* in 2014). The latter provides 1.5 million yen/year (about £10,000) for up to two years of training and up to five years from the beginning of farm management (MAFF 2019c). These measures, further discussed in Chapter 6, significantly contributed to the growing trend of new entry. The Ministry of Agriculture also consolidated a comprehensive system of counselling for youth choosing a farming career. The new National Consultation Centre for Agriculture (*zenkoku shinki shūnō sōdan sentā*)[82] offers opportunities for agricultural training, internships in sponsored farms, and organises annual rounds of agricultural fairs in major cities. Agricultural fairs provide information about agriculture in different prefectures/municipalities and job opportunities in farms. The diffusion of online platforms advertising job opportunities also facilitated the process of new entry.[83] As Egawa (2016a) points out, in the past years, the amount of information available online has increased

[81] Approximately half of all new entrants under 49 years of age were farm successors, 35% were newly employed farmers, and 15% were self-employed farmers (MAFF 2019a). It must be noted that an indefinite share on new self-employed farmers (*shinki sannyu-sha*) constitute of farm heirs 'renovating' the family farm (e.g. starting new production).

[82] The organisation, established in 2012 and administrated by the National Chamber of Agriculture (*zenkoku nōgyō kaigisho*), oversees prefectural 'promotion centres for agriculture' (*nōgyō fukyū centā*).

[83] Agrinavi.com, one of the most popular websites, claims that more than ten thousand people every month use its services.

dramatically, with prefectures and municipalities advertising job opportunities and agriculture-related support schemes on their websites, and new entry farmers sharing their experiences on blogs and other social media. Together with national subsidies, the number of regional/local support schemes for new farmers has also increased as prefectures and municipalities tried to take advantage of the new agricultural revival to attract new settlers. Nagano prefecture features a variety of training programmes and financial support schemes discussed in Chapter 5.

A booklet published by Nagano prefecture promoting women's new entry in agriculture.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the increase of new entry farmers has progressively slowed down as the Japanese economy improved in the second half of the 2010s. According to the head of Kyoto prefecture agricultural promotion centre, the declining trend should not surprise as the peak of new entry of 2015 was unnatural and cannot be taken as the standard. It should not surprise that the initial wave has now partly waned. 'Many people with an interest in farming joined the industry following the introduction of the national support scheme in 2012. The annual number of new entrants is still much higher than ten years ago, and this is what really matters.' Not all evil comes

to harm. According to an official from JA Saku, the declining number of applicants is not necessarily a bad thing: 'Before there were many people thinking to give agriculture a try for lack of better options, but now those who come are usually serious about agriculture.'

As for pro-rural migration discussed in the previous chapter, it is difficult to get a clear picture of new entry into farming because of regional differences and partial, scattered data from different organisations involved. Statistics on the national support scheme for new self-employed farmers do not provide information on recipients apart from age and gender, and do not include new entrants above 45 years of age or new entrants engaging in small-scale or part-time agriculture who are ineligible for subsidies. Prefectures keep statistics on new agricultural entrants, but often do not distinguish between farm successors and new entrants from a non-farming background, or between employed farmers and self-employed farmers. Moreover, they generally do not provide data on new entrants' age, gender, marital status, place of origin, previous employment, etc. Regional and local differences are significant. While some towns and areas might attract young, 'lifestyle' farmers, other town and areas might attract more entrepreneurial-oriented individuals depending on specific local conditions (popularity, proximity to cities, crop specialisation, presence or absence of producers groups, available distribution channels and market outlets, degree of integration with the local processing industry, etc.). Although this research is concerned explicitly with self-employed farmers, not only do employed farmers represent a larger share of all new entrants than self-employed ones, but their role has become crucial for addressing the labour shortage problem. At the same time, their recruitment is mostly independent of the initiative of local administrations, which can at most advertise job ads on their websites or provide financial incentives (e.g. settling-in financial aid).

Similar to pro-rural migration organisations, counselling organisations can provide valuable insights on aspiring farmers.[84] According to the responsible person at Kyoto Job Cafe (a public

[84] Like for aspiring pro-rural migrants, this group is not necessarily representative of those who ultimately enter agriculture.

office helping people finding a job in rural areas and agriculture in particular), aspiring farmers can be divided into entrepreneurial farmers and lifestyle farmers. In Kyoto prefecture, the first group is smaller and decreasing, while the second group is larger and increasing. While such categorisation is too simplistic, the lifestyle-entrepreneur farmer dichotomy can be usefully employed for explanatory proposes.[85] According to statistics on new entrants under the national financial support scheme, agriculture seems to be increasingly considered as a profession rather than as a lifestyle choice. Considerations such as 'agriculture allows me to be my own boss' or 'profit from agriculture depends on how you do things'[86] have become more common, while considerations such as 'I want to practice organic farming' or 'I like village lifestyle' have become less common (NCA 2017:22). On the other hand, given the conditions set by the national support scheme, it could be argued that new entrants using the scheme are overall more entrepreneurial than those entering agriculture through alternative routes and who do not appear in such surveys. These issues are further discussed in Chapter 6.

Agricultural entrepreneurs

Regardless of how one chooses to refer to them, both lifestyle farmers and entrepreneurial farmers are ultimately entrepreneurs. New entry farmers face numerous challenges, including accessing farmland and housing, farming know-how, capital, and market outlets for their produce. Previous studies point out that this mode of entry is generally impracticable without substantial support from local institutions (agricultural cooperatives, local governments, farmland committees, etc.). Problems related to farmland access are often discussed in the literature. As previously mentioned, landowners are often reluctant to entrust their land to outsiders to their kinship group, so for new entrants, it is paramount to earn the trust of the landlord and the community. Previous

[85] As for the above comment on new entrants in Kyoto prefecture, one might argue that her view is biased since 'entrepreneurial' aspiring farmers are typically more knowledgeable about production areas, training programmes, etc. and might bypass counselling in organisations such as Kyoto Job Cafe.
[86] '*Nōgyō wa yarikata shidai moukaru kara*'

studies have emphasised the importance of establishing good relations with landlords in order to proceed with investments (Ogasawara and Kusano 2013; Shigiya and Ueno 2017) as well as the key role of mentor farmers as mediators (Shima 2013a; Egawa 2016a). In order to acquire farming know-how, most aspiring farmers conduct training under a host farmer, who usually helps trainees in securing farmland, housing, and machinery. Such responsibilities often represent a burden for mentor farmers, especially because new entrants continue to seek mentors' help long after entry (Shima 2013a). This problem, it is argued, should be addressed at the institutional level, for example, through a system of remuneration for mentor farmers as in Nagano prefecture's case (Hashimoto and Hu 2016). Only a minority of new entrants purchase farmland because of its high price, a factor arguably limiting investments and thus the choice of the crop and the farming model adopted. Open field vegetable, a crop that can be profitably grown on small plots, requiring low investments, and guaranteeing early returns, is unsurprisingly the most common among new entrants (NCA 2017:47).

Many new entry farmers choose a career in agriculture primarily because this allows them to manage their working hours freely (NCA 2017:22). This kind of optimism, however, contrasts with a gloomier reality. Many new entrants experience work-life balance issues, including the impossibility of taking days off (NCA 2017:58). Another common problem is securing housing in rural areas. Financial difficulties are, however, the most worrisome. After five years from the establishment of a farm, only about half of all new entry farmers succeed in securing sufficient income to live on from their activity (NCA 2017:47).[87] This is particularly surprising given the amount of support available and the degree of protection supposedly enjoyed by farmers in Japan. What are the obstacles preventing so many people from making a living out of agriculture?

[87] Data refer to recipients of the national financial support scheme. In the first two years of management, the average annual income is 540,000 yen (about £3,400), rising to 1,170,000 yen (£7,400) in the third and fourth year. In the first two years, 21.8% of new farmers incur in a negative balance, 17.7% records zero profits, and 18.1% earns less than 500,000 yen (£3,100). In the third and fourth year, these figures shift respectively to 13.4%, 14.2%, and 13%.

According to the head of Nagano prefecture agricultural promotion centre, many people are not aware of how difficult it is to make a living in agriculture. ‘We don’t want to sugar the pill. Many people quit after a few years, so we prefer to discourage people without true resolve.’ Ogasawara (2016) argues that problems are typically the consequence of poor planning. New entry farmers should carefully develop their business plan based on available workforce in the area, family restrictions, and market conditions. Shigiya and Ueno (2017:36) argue that some people end up buying unneeded equipment and machinery incentivized by subsidies and expand too rapidly. According to the head of Tōmi city agricultural office, low farm income is largely due to lack of farming skills, low efficiency, and insufficient farmed area. Crop differences are certainly significant, as well as business and marketing models.

The following chapters consider difficulties faced by new entrants in accessing farmland, housing, farming know-how, capital, and market outlets for their produce. The exploration of these aspects allows a deeper understanding of the above remarks and uncovers important facets of rural communities and Japan’s agri-food system.

Chapter 4

Accessing land and housing: property, abandonment, and Japan's land crisis

Securing farmland and housing represent significant hurdles for new entry farmers from the city. Given the current trend of farmland and house abandonment all over Japan, this appears as a paradoxical situation. This Chapter explores difficulties faced by new settlers, as well as the causes and the consequences of Japan's land crisis. Property abandonment is shown to be more than a consequence of depopulation and to largely depend on specific social norms, laws, and institutions. This chapter considers in particular features of Japan's real estate market, construction industry, patterns of urban development, and inheritance law. From an anthropological perspective, property refers to the many ways in which rights and obligations, privileges and restrictions govern the dealings of humans concerning resources and objects of value (Turner 2017:26). The value of objects is qualified according to socio-cultural perspectives and varies depending on the social relations inherent in it. Together with an economic interest, kinship emerged as a central ideological drive behind issues surrounding property in rural communities.

Trust and reputation in rural communities

As discussed in Chapter 2, fitting into the rural community is one of the greatest challenges faced by urban-rural migrants. For new entry farmers, in particular, establishing trust is paramount in order to access farmland. Together with a positive attitude and a good dose of social skills, it is also important to show one's determination and effort. To be acknowledged by local farmers and hope to access more, better farmland, new farmers must work hard. 'Farmers are always watching' an instructor at Komoro agricultural school told me. 'If neighbouring farmers go to the fields at seven in the morning, you should be there at 6:30, and in the evening, you shouldn't leave before them. Your field must always be neat and tidy. You should mow the grass before someone tells you it's time to. Also, you should ask for advice because this makes old farmers happy and of course

you should listen to what they say. Then they will start to think "ooh that guy is serious about agriculture" and the rumour will spread. Eventually, old farmers will come to you asking to take care of their fields.' As an ex trainee from JA Ueda Farm programme told me: 'These days it's easy to access farmland if you are serious and hardworking. If you earn the trust of people, they will come asking you to help them with their fields, and soon you'll have more farmland than you can manage.'

Things may work well for most people as long as they do their best, but preconceived ideas sometimes complicate matters of trust. For instance, organic farmers usually find it harder to access land and be accepted by the farming community. According to the operation director of Matsumoto Centre for Organic Agriculture, the reason why many organic farmers score poorly financially is because most of them can only access low-quality fields and must spend many years restoring soil fertility. 'When old farmers hear *mu-nōyaku* (no pesticides), they become immediately suspicious and worried. They start thinking, "what kind of person is this? What will people think if I lease my field to a *mu-nōyaku* farmer?"' This was the case for Michiko, a 38 year old woman living in a small hamlet in Komoro. She returned to her hometown after working in Chiba for about ten years and now lives in her family house with her husband and two children. Michiko and her husband are organic farmers and also run a cafe and bed and breakfast. Morinosato is a vivacious place, hosting concerts, exhibitions, talks, meetings, and foreign travellers. For many years Michiko has been asking her neighbour, an old farmer in his 80s, to rent her the bordering field so that she could expand her vegetable production, but he always refused. 'He says that he needs it, but the field has been left idle for years….Old people are very conservative. He probably considers Morinosato a commune of hippies and would never entrust his land to us.'

Reputation is paramount in rural communities. Leasing farmland to a 'non respectable' person can negatively affect the landowner' reputation; selling it too can become a source of undesirable gossip. 'People might think you are in financial need.' one of the employees of Ueda JA told me. 'Farmers are very proud and care a lot about their status in the community.' The importance of

prestige in rural communities is documented by previous ethnographic work and was well exemplified by the so-called *kikai binbō* phenomenon, whereby thousands of farmers got into debt during the 1980s in order to buy expensive, unneeded machinery. Buying the latest tractor model did not make much economic sense but was functional to maintain one's status in the community (Kuwayama 1992).

Prestige is so important because it does not simply concern individuals, but the entire household. In Japan, the household, or *ie*, is traditionally the primary unit of social organisation. Household is a better translation than family as the *ie* includes all co-residents and is not necessarily restricted only to family members. As a unit, the *ie* is in fact, defined by the criterion of residence rather than kinship or affinity (Nakane 1967:2; Bachnik 1983). The *ie* transcend the idea of a group composed by its living members; it is instead conceptualised in a time continuum from past to future and includes ancestors, successors, the house, properties, and the family graves (Fukutake 1982:28). Succession to the headship, with male primogeniture as ideal succession, is paramount and guarantees continuity of the *ie*. The sisters and brothers of the successor can either marry into another household or create a new one. Newly formed households would traditionally receive a property portion from the family of the groom or bride and become branch families of the main family, thus forming a *dōzoku* (family alliance). The centrality of the *ie* creates a status distinction between households, with the main family and branch families traditionally bound by mutually recognised links of genealogy, often containing an element of subordination (Fukutake 1982:31). Although such logics have largely disappeared in modern Japan and the importance of 'the family's place in the village' has faded, the status of main families is still recognised in rural communities. Given the importance traditionally placed on the *ie*, it is not surprising that ensuring the reproduction and the prestige of the household remains important.

Farmers' reluctance to relinquish farmland is often explained by the importance placed on household continuity (e.g. Moore 1990; Iwamoto 2003; Uchiyama 2014). To be sure, there are many other reasons why landowners may choose not to part with it. As discussed in Chapter 3,

expectations of converting farmland to other uses and selling it at a high price have long inhibited farmland transfers. Such prospects have now largely disappeared in most parts of the country, but the idea of land as a nested egg still survives. 'My mother doesn't want to sell the family land, no matter what, and that's probably a good idea.' said a woman working part-time at JA Ueda Farm. 'After all, land is always a guarantee should things go bad financially.' Some new settlers had a more cynical view: 'Old people in rural areas can be very grasping, they never let go of their stuff. Maybe that's because they experienced deprivation in their youth.' Many farmers certainly developed an emotional attachment to their land. As a JA employee told me, old farmers got their land at the end of the war and worked there all their life, so they do not want to give it away and certainly not to people who are not as dedicated as they were. This might explain the fact that, even after leasing a field, old farmers often continue to 'poke their nose' into tenants' farm management, as a new entry farmer put it.

On a warm morning of mid-September, three trainees and I were harvesting grape in one of the orchards recently acquired by JA Ueda Farm. We were busy working when an older man coming from the street started yelling at us. We recognised Yamaguchi san, the landlord. We had met him once or twice before, but he did not seem to recognise us. He was furious as he thought we were stealing his grape. One of the trainees tried to explain to him who we were and what we were doing. 'We come from Ueda Farm, do you remember? We are here because you entrusted your orchard to JA.' He would not listen and got angrier. We decided to withdraw or, I should probably say, to run away while he kept shouting at us. Yamaguchi san, at the time 81 years old, was affected by dementia. While certainly exceptional, this somehow comical anecdote reveals the difficulties often involved in dealing with old landlords, who tend to be quite intrusive concerning the management of their fields by tenants, especially younger ones. Many old farmers feel entitled to pay routine visits and criticise tenants if something is not done the way they like it. This happened on numerous occasions during fieldwork: 'You should trim those bunches more! It's time to mow the grass! Don't cut that branch!' Pieces of advice are certainly valuable, but new farmers often do

not appreciate so much attention. According to JA Ueda Farm director, the problem is especially prominent with fruit orchards. 'Old farmers planted those trees 40 or 50 years ago and tended them for most of their life. They are like children to them.'

Land is, no doubt, a special kind of property. Most legal systems distinguish between real property and other forms of property. Farmland, in particular, is typically inherited and deeply embedded in place, kinship ties, and memory. In Japan, the bundle of rights surrounding farmland is also shaped by the heritage of interdependence characterising rural communities. As discussed in Chapter 3, the integrative nature of paddy field agriculture has long been used in Japan to explain the strong interdependence between members of the community and Japanese people's propensity for cooperation and group behaviour. The collectivistic ethos characterising land use contributes to explaining widespread reluctance to entrust outsiders of the community with shared works and the care of communal resources. Compared to most Western countries, not only does the bundle of rights surrounding farmland encompass the farming community to a greater extent, but it also determines a situation whereby landlords feel entitled to question tenants to a level that would be considered unacceptable.

New entry farmers are usually not interested in the purchase of farmland because of capital constraints and because ownership over land is not perceived as essential. Even when establishing a new orchard (a long-term investment), new entrants were not particularly worried about the possibility of the lease contract not being renewed. Some of them mentioned that tenants develop ownership-like rights after ten years of land use, making such eventuality unlikely. As discussed in Chapter 3, legislation heavily protecting tenant rights was progressively relaxed in the 1970s, but the idea of tenants developing ownership rights remains widespread. This is another element inhibiting farmland transfers, and, according to an employee of Tōmi agricultural office, one of the reasons some landowners prefer informal lease agreements over contracts.[88]

[88] More generally, farmers are also worried that they will not be able to claim their land back because it would be difficult to ask someone to return a field after they have invested time and money in soil and other improvement measures.

While reluctance among landowners to sell or lease farmland represents a significant obstacle for new entry farmers, most people concurred that the situation is gradually improving as a consequence of rural depopulation. New settlers too were generally optimistic about prospects of farm expansion: 'In the next ten years, so much land will become available. I think accessing farmland will be less of a problem from now on'. In Tōmi as in other parts of the country, the number of lease contracts without remuneration has been steadily increasing. As a JA employee from Saku city said to me 'Old farmers have all sort of envies and grudges. I've heard many of them saying they would be happy to lease out a field to consolidate an area, but that because this or that person was involved, they decided not to. This is a major reason why farmland consolidation never moved forward. But old farmers are dying, and their children don't care about farmland.'

Farmland abandonment

Suganuma san, at the time 78 year old, is an apple farmer from Komoro city. His orchard rises on the southern side of Mount Asama, perfectly exposed to the afternoon sun and enjoying a stunning view of the Chikuma valley and the Northern Alps. Suganuma san is looking for a successor. His only daughter and her husband still live in Komoro, but they do not want to take over the farm. One day he asked me: 'Would you like to take my apple orchard? I will pass you the customers as well!' I told him that I was honoured by his offer, but that I had to go back to my country. I was puzzled by the situation. Not only does Suganuma's orchard rise on a consolidated hectare of farmland (quite a unique thing, especially for a mountainous region), but it also counts on a well-established clientele from Tokyo that every year comes to Komoro to pick and purchase his apples. How could he not find someone to take his farm for free? I decided to help him with his search. I talked with JA trainees about it, but to my surprise, everyone was quite unenthusiastic and evasive. I could not understand why young aspiring farmers from the city struggling to find a suitable plot of land would turn down such an opportunity without even having a look at the place or a chat with the owner. Talking about the matter with JA Ueda Farm director a few days later, I

realised that farmers like Suganuma san are not merely looking for someone to entrust their land, but for a successor (i.e. an heir) to the household.

Adoption, known in Japanese as '*yōshi engumi*,' or more simply '*yōshi*,' is an old and still relatively common practice in Japan. Traditionally prevalent among upper classes, its purpose has long been to secure succession in the household when a suitable successor could not be found within the family. The practice can be understood in relation to the *ie*, which, as previously mentioned, is a corporate body with assets that exists beyond current members. As Fukutake (1982:129) points out, although the pre-war *ie* system has mostly disappeared, 'the *ie* still nevertheless lives in the idea that someone, even if it is not the eldest son, should carry on the *ie* inherited from the ancestors. One can reasonably say that the *ie* system still survives in this core idea.' Though the 1947 post-war Civil Code gave equal inheritance rights to all sons and daughters, in farming families, non-successors hardly ever demand this right.[89] Indeed, if farmers had to divide their property among all brothers and sisters, it would become impossible to live on most farms. As Nakane wrote in 1967 (5), 'agricultural life in present-day Japan seems to be carried on largely by means of the renunciation of the inheritance-right by non-successors.' Some characteristics of adoption in Japan include the primary focus on the *ie* (not the adoptee), the adoptee being relatively old (with the vast majority being adults) and often recruited among close relatives (Goodman 2000:146). The system is extremely flexible: a brother, a son-in-law, or a married couple can be adopted. In some sense, adoption resembles marriage in how the adoptee is chosen and incorporated into the household. Indeed a large number of such adoptions have always taken place at the time of marriage (Goodman 2000:145).

[89] To ensure the viability of farm businesses, promote farm succession, and avoid farmland fragmentation, the Japanese government provides inheritance tax exemptions when only one heir inherits farmland and continues farming.

Adoption for the purpose of continuing the *ie* and other reasons remained popular[90], but the practice is increasingly perceived as old-fashioned. As Ueda Farm director told me, young entry farmers do not like the idea of becoming subjected to a patron, let alone being adopted. They want to be independent and free to make their own management choices. In 2008 the MAFF introduced a programme to match aspiring farmers with old farmers without a successor. The programme, however, produced scarce results due to difficulties in building trust between farmers and potential successors (Nagatani 2015) and, one might argue, also due to adoption-related issues.[91]

I do not know if Suganuma san will find a successor for his orchard, but I know it will be difficult. Many farmers in Komoro and, indeed, all over Japan are in a similar situation. Millions of trees tended with dedication for decades will be cut in the near future. Those orchards contributed to define the identity of the hamlets and still stand as living reminders of years of prosperity for rural Japan, a time when farmers, emancipated from poverty and segregation, saw themselves as artisans producing high-quality products sold to Japan's increasingly wealthy urban class. Today trees are cut, not to be substituted by better varieties, but to be reclaimed by nature.

Farmland abandonment is a visible sign of rural depopulation and the cause of numerous problems in water management, forest stewardship, and pest control. Abandoned farmland began to increase in the 1990s both as a consequence of the declining farming population and lowering profit expectations among landowners to sell land at a high price.[92] As discussed in Chapter 3, rather than a factor of production, land in Japan has long been considered a marketable asset. Especially during the years of economic development, land came to be seen as one of the safest, most profitable assets both due to expectations of price increases and Japan's extremely low taxation on farmland

[90] As a way for the elderly without children to ensure that they will be cared for in their old age in return for passing on their inheritance, for homosexual couples to ensure inheritance between them if one partner dies, for employers to keep foreign workers in the country, etc. (Goodman 2000:147).
[91] Between 2008 and 2013, of 509 potential successors and 301 farmers that signed up for the programme, only 35 pairs successfully completed the transfers (Nagatani 2015).
[92] In Tōmi, the value of buildable land decreased by 7% between 2013 and 2017 (Tōmishi 2018:4).

(Noguchi 1992).[93] Since the early 1990s, however, the contraction of urban development projects and public works in rural areas progressively lowered such expectations, defusing the vicious circle that made prices skyrocket throughout the 1970s and 1980s. According to a survey published by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation in 2015, Japanese people no longer consider land a profitable asset as they used to. While 62% of the sample agreed that land was a better asset than stocks in 1993, only 31% thought so in 2015 (MLIT 2015a:35). Returning to be a 'mere' factor of production in a struggling industry, farmland value is now close to zero in many parts of the country. Landowners always had an incentive to keep agricultural lots in good condition, should the opportunity present itself to convert and sell farmland at a high price. As such prospects disappear, however, farmland is increasingly abandoned by old farmers or, later on, by their children living elsewhere.

Not only do many farm successors have no intention to take over their parents' farms, but they consider inheriting farmland and other properties as a hassle. In many parts of the country, real property has little or no commercial value and often represents a liability for the children of rural residents living in cities, with property taxes and maintenance costs adding to potential complaints from neighbours and quarrels with siblings. More and more people find themselves in the vexing situation of inheriting unwanted properties in rural areas. Legal counselling by juridical clerks, seminars organised by real estate companies, and books and magazines on the topic are increasing rapidly (Yoshihara 2017:5). Disposing of undesired properties before one's departure has become part of *shūkatsu* (preparation for end-of-life) arrangements. 'Children ask their old parents to get rid of land and properties because they don't want to deal with it. If only one parent is left alive, they might ask them to sell the house and move to an elderly home.'[94] Many people would like to get rid of their inheritance but cannot find a buyer or even someone to take it for free. Once a property is inherited, legally, it is not even possible to give it away, so cases of relinquished inheritance are

[93] Between 1961 and 2016, 1,620,000 hectares of farmland went lost, mostly due to conversion to residential and other uses (MAFF 2017b).
[94] Interview with an employee of Saku *akiya* bank.

steadily increasing (Supreme Court of Japan 2018).[95] Some people try to donate unwanted properties to local governments, which usually decline such requests (Yoshihara 2017:84). For many people, the simplest solution is to inherit and then abandon the land and other properties. 'If you still live in the area, it's difficult to do that, but when the heirs live elsewhere, they don't feel much guilt for the problems they might cause to the neighbours.'[96]

The Japanese government and local administrations have introduced different policy plans to cope with the mounting problem of farmland abandonment. As discussed in Chapter 3, farmland banks were introduced in 2014 to substitute farmland harmonization groups to promote farmland consolidation and its efficient use. Among reform proposals to address farmland banks' shortcomings, there is the idea that these organisations should take an active role in tackling the problem of farmland abandonment. One of the proposals allows local farmland committees (*nōgyō īinkai*) to entrust abandoned plots to farmland banks for 20 years if none of the heirs makes a claim following a public announcement (Nōgyō Shinbun 25 January 2018). On the other hand, farmland banks are likely to incur the same problems faced by harmonisation groups in addressing the problem of farmland abandonment: the tendency, due to budget constraints, to avoid renting or purchasing land for which buyers or lessees are unlikely to be found (Ito et al. 2016:585).

Local initiatives might succeed where central policy does not. Public corporations like JA Ueda Farm provide an interesting case discussed in detail in Chapter 5. JA Ueda Farm acquires (lease) fields that can no longer be looked after by their ageing owners and passes them on to trainees upon completion of training. Old orchards are usually in a bad condition when JA Ueda Farm takes them, but in two years, aspiring farmers carry out improvement measures and restore

[95] From 150,049 in 2007 to 197,656 in 2016. If all heirs renounce to their right, the civil code prescribes that the property will be entrusted to a 'property manager' designated by a family court who will pay eventual debs contracted by the deceased owner and transfer what is left to the national treasury. However, not only is there a shortage of legal scriveners for the growing number of cases, but the value of such properties is usually so low that it cannot even cover the cost of the procedure (Yoshihara 2017:72). For the heirs, the cost of renouncing an inheritance is low if they choose to do it themselves, but because the procedure is time-consuming and must be completed within three months from the death of the previous owner, relying on a professional is common.

[96] Interview with an officer of Komoro city *akiya* bank.

productivity. By addressing at the same time the problem of farmland abandonment and the training of new entrants, organisations like JA Ueda Farm provide a valuable service to regional agriculture. Agricultural cooperatives, in particular, allow the feasibility of such a system thanks to their influence, network, and non-profit orientation.

The *akiya* mondai

House abandonment, known in Japan as *akiya mondai* (the empty house problem), is the complementary side of farmland abandonment. The issue has drawn more and more attention in recent years and especially gained salience after the publication of a study by the Nomura Research Institute (2016) in 2016 suggesting that the number of vacant houses, at the time about eight million, will rise to 21.7 million by 2033, about one-third of all houses in Japan. To be sure, not every *akiya* is an abandoned, crumbling building. *Akiya* are classified into four groups for statistical purposes: vacant houses for rent, for sale, second (holiday) houses, and 'other vacant houses' (i.e. empty houses that are not advertised). Houses for rent represent over half of all *akiya* (51%) and in 2018 stood at 4.3 million units (MIC 2019a). 'Other vacant houses' constitute the second largest group (41%) with 3.5 million units and are growing rapidly.[97] Although abandoned, dilapidated houses currently represent a minority of all *akiya*, millions of second houses and houses for sale/rent are likely to remain empty and deteriorate in the forthcoming years due to Japan's demographic decline. Depopulation is certainly a key factor leading to the proliferation of vacant houses. However, the phenomenon is also the product of specific features of Japan's real estate market, construction industry, and patterns of urban development.

At the end of the War, Japan faced a severe housing shortage problem. Even by 1958 only 17,930,000 houses were available for 18,650,000 households (MLIT 2018). Thanks to sustained industrial and urban development, the shortage problem was gradually solved, and in 1968 the

[97] Between 2013 and 2019 vacant houses for rent/sale increased by 20,000 units, second houses shrunk by 30,000 units, and 'other vacant houses' increased by 280,000 units (MIC 2019b).

number of houses began to exceed that of households. The number of households kept rising due to high fertility rates and changes in the family structure, but the stock of houses grew even faster, creating an expanding surplus of houses. This was indeed a common occurrence in most industrialised countries, but in Japan, the house/population ratio kept growing extremely rapidly. Compared to England, the United States, and France, in 2015 Japan's house/population ratio was 2.8, 2.3, and 1.3 times higher, respectively (MLIT 2015b in Nozawa 2016:5). Although Japan's population began to decline in 2011, and households' increase is projected to end in 2020 (NIPSSR 2018), the real estate market shows no signs of slowing down. Japan finds itself in a paradoxical situation: the population is shrinking, the number of vacant houses increases, but thousands of new houses are built every year.

Houses in Japan are treated as fast-depreciating assets and are typically not built to last. The value of used houses (*chūko jūtaku*) is based on the assumption that a single-family detached structure is worthless after 25-30 years, while the land under it generally retains value (Schoppa forthcoming). Condominium units (*manshon*) are generally built of longer-lasting materials and depreciate on a longer timetable than detached family houses, about 30-35 years.[98] While Japan's history of natural disasters contributed to define home-building standards and the way of valuing used structures, the rapid depreciation of used houses is due mainly to their discrimination in financing home purchases (Schoppa forthcoming). For most of the post-war period, the Government Housing Loan Corporation (GHLC) was the primary source of financing for home purchases. It did not lend any money for the purchase of detached houses older than 25 years old, while for used houses less than that age, it reduced the normal repayment period and charged higher interest rates.[99] Banks have today replaced the GHLC as the source of home financing, but continue to use the same depreciation schedule to value structures and provide mortgage lending. This system ultimately discourages homebuilders from building long-lasting structures and homeowners

[98] *Manshon* represent the majority of used houses sold every year in Japan.
[99] This bias toward new home construction was arguably due to the GHLC's mission in sustaining the home-building industry (Schoppa forthcoming).

from renovating their properties. As a result, the used house market only accounts for 14.7% of the whole real estate market (MLIT 2015c:2). The need to address the situation has been recently recognised at the policy level. A cabinet resolution adopted in 2016 updating the national 'home living basic plan' (*jūseikatsu kihon keikaku*) set as a goal the expansion of the market for used houses from 4 to 8 trillion yen and the house reformation business from 7 to 12 trillion yen by 2025 (MLIT 2016:9-10). Both markets have shown signs of improvement in recent years, but it is unlikely that such ambitious targets will be met without substantial reform of the home purchase financing system (Yano Research Institute 2019).

The proliferation of new houses comes from the expansion of major cities and, most notably, new residential areas throughout regional Japan. Rather than building on existing building lots, developers have an incentive to build in newly developed areas where houses are easy to sell: they are cheap (converted farmland is less expensive than building lots and does not require the demolition of existing structures) and always in demand because of the brand-new look of the neighbourhoods, proximity to new supermarkets, and available parking space (Nozawa 2016:66). Less than 10% of new houses in Japan are built on existing building lots, while the majority stand on converted farmland (MLIT 2017a). Regulatory plans for urban development exist, but they are amended continuously by local administrations due to the numerous interests involved. While landowners (i.e. farmers) are eager to convert farmland and sell at a high price, real estate and construction companies benefit from work and commissions. It is not just about money. As Nozawa (2016, 71) points out, local administrations see the creation of new urban development areas as a way to stimulate the economy, prevent outmigration, and attract new residents from neighbouring towns.

As a consequence of the urban sprawl, old cities are increasingly left behind, and *akiya* proliferate. Because existing building lots located near train stations are more expensive than converted farmland, there is little incentive to rebuild on them. This creates a vicious circle whereby old urban centres grow increasingly shabby, and new residential areas become more appealing. The

resulting paradox is that *akiya* rates (the ratio of *akiya* on the total stock of houses) are surprisingly high near train stations (MLIT 2018). Another effect of the urban sprawl is the lowering of the population density, in turn leading to rising costs of public services and maintenance of existing infrastructure.[100] Local governments are usually insolvent, and many cannot keep up with the necessary maintenance of thousands of kilometres of streets, bridges, pipes, wires, ditches, and sewers**.** The lack of adequate infrastructure maintenance is a mounting problem all over Japan, and failing to understand the benefits of compact cities, local administrations further aggravate the existing problems.

An emblematic example of chaotic urbanisation is rent apartment lots, so-called *chintai apāto* (Nozawa 2016:82-89). These buildings are widespread in Japan, and it is common to see them rising in the middle of paddy fields or otherwise deserted areas. One wonders why they were built there in the first place. In the past decades, more and more farmers quit agriculture and invested in the home-rental business by converting farmland into building lots, taking advantage of property and inheritance tax deductions. Numerous subletting businesses have been established to speculate on the growing market. Despite rising awareness among rural residents of the risks involved in the *chintai apāto* business,[101] the creation of rent apartments continues at a pace of roughly 350,000 units per year (ibid:83). As previously mentioned, vacant houses for rent represent over half of all *akiya*. These properties are unrelated to the *akiya mondai*, but many of them are likely to remain empty and deteriorate in the coming years.

Vacant houses create numerous problems. In the case of condominiums (*manshon*) and apartment complexes (*danchi*) in urban areas, a growing number of empty flats leads to the deterioration of the entire building and, progressively, of the whole neighbourhood. The shrinking

[100] At the same time, persistent urban development in major metropolitan areas creates the opposite problem, with skyscrapers rising one next to the other leading to issues associated with excessive population concentration.
[101] Subletting companies, usually subsidiaries of construction companies, guarantee high returns to landowners and promise to take care of everything, from construction works to finding tenants and managing the apartments. Contracts, however, often include tricky clauses, such as that monthly rents might have to be lowered to attract new tenants or that repair works will have to carried out at the expense of the landlord by a designated construction company whenever considered necessary by the contractor. There are numerous ongoing lawsuits against such fraudulent businesses.

number of residents, often elderly, cannot afford to pay for infrastructure maintenance. Broken elevators, leaking gas and water pipes, wildfires, and even criminals occupying vacant flats are among the consequences. Even major Japanese cities count numerous cases of apartment blocks turning into slum-like areas (Nozawa 2016, 122-127). Similarly, in rural and peri-urban areas, the proliferation of abandoned detached houses negatively affects the neighbourhood, which becomes increasingly shabby, leading to more houses being abandoned. Empty houses quickly become a haven for pests and can turn into illegal dumping areas. They also pose a health hazard due to risks of fire or collapse. A new bill adopted in 2015 to address the problem of dangerous *akiya* allows local administrations to request the demolition of designated buildings (MLIT 2019).[102] However, local administrations are extremely reluctant to rely on enforcement when it comes to private property. In Nagano prefecture, this measure had only been enforced twice as of February 2019. It usually takes an accident or a dangerous building on a street used by children on their way to school to prompt action. As a local government official told me, 'It's people's private property, for local administrations it's difficult to compel someone to demolish his house.' Local governments receive numerous complaints from *akiya* neighbours, but there's little they can do. 'We send warning notices to the landlords, who either live somewhere else or simply ignore them.'[103]

Homeowners have several reasons not to demolish their empty houses. Not only is the cost of demolition high, but a building lot without a house standing on it is charged with property taxes up to six times higher. Considering that, in most parts of Japan, such lots are likely to remain unsold, there is no financial incentive to demolish a building. Houses that do not border a street cannot be rebuilt by law, so in these cases, landlords cannot expect to sell at all. *Akiya* owners willing to sell typically keep the house standing, advertise it as a building lot, and only demolish it once a buyer has been found.

[102] *Akiya taisaku tokubetsu sochi-hō.*
[103] Interview with an official at the akiya bank of Ueda city.

Homeowners also have many reasons not to relinquish their properties. Vacant houses are often used as storehouses for farming appliances or for the plethora of possessions accumulated in a lifetime by the current or previous owners. The idea of emptying a house full of memories and junk discourages many *akiya* owners otherwise willing to sell. 'Many people turn melancholic even before starting and end up procrastinating.'[104] An extremely delicate issue is represented by the domestic *butsudan*, the Buddhist family altar containing the ancestors' ashes. Family altars cannot be simply thrown away, and at the same time, these heavy wooden cabinets can hardly be moved into small apartments in the city. A new entry farmer in Ueda city told me about the peculiar leasing conditions demanded by an *akiya* owner: he could not use the *butsudan* room and had to vacate the house for a week during *obon* (Buddhist festival for honouring the spirits of ancestors) when needed for the family gathering. Sometimes family graves rise next to the house, discouraging homeowners from selling or renting (supposing that a buyer for such properties can be found). Issues related to the *ie* and headship duties remain significant. In rural villages, *bunkei* families (branches of the main family) may strongly oppose the sale of the *honkei* (main branch) house. Some rural residents are worried about their reputation and what neighbours might think should they decide to sell or lease their house, while others simply do not want to part with their possessions no matter what.

Kazu san, my landlord, is the elder son of a farming house in Komoro city, Nukaji hamlet. In the early 2000s, his father started to rent some of the many rooms of their old house to occasional construction workers and increasingly to tourists wanting to experience 'authentic country life.' Kazu expanded that idea. Today, his guesthouse is one of the most lively places in Komoro and certainly in Nukaji hamlet, the typical example of a so-called *genkai shūraku* (a village on the verge of demographic extinction). The hamlet rises at 800m on the southern side of Asama mountain, served by a small bus passing three times a day. There are no shops or restaurants, and the closest convenience store is one kilometre downhill. About half of the buildings in the village are

[104] Interview with an *akiya* bank official.

abandoned and in a state of disarray. For a long time, Kazu had been trying to purchase the crumbling building next to his house, a two-floor wooden structure that had been abandoned for about two decades and became home to a colony of cats. One day I saw Kazu cutting weeds in the building's yard and asked him why he had to do it instead of the owner. ‘Because he won’t do it’ he replied. ‘You know how many times did I asked him to sell me the house? I am basically doing him a favour because it has no commercial value and the cost of demolition is a big liability on it. But he always refuses, he won’t even talk about money. Maybe once he’s gone his children will be more reasonable.’

An *akiya* in Nukaji hamlet.

In the past years, numerous akiya banks have been established all over Japan to address the mounting problem of vacant houses. Akiya banks are public bodies managed at the municipal level, acting as mediators between homeowners and potential buyers/tenants. Akiya banks cannot finalise

sale or lease contracts and rely on a licensed real estate agent.[105] However, unlike real estate companies, they offer a small allowance for cleaning costs and, as a public body, provide a higher degree of trustworthiness for interested buyers/tenants (e.g. transparency concerning the properties and the neighbourhood). In some municipalities, *akiya* banks also offer financial support for renovation. Financial incentives are sometimes provided by prefectures and NGOs as part of local revitalisation initiatives. For instance, one of the most fruitful measures of Kyoto prefecture's 2009 policy plan (*sato-ryoku saisei akushon puran*) to save its then 141 'marginal villages' on the verge of extinction was the introduction of financial incentives for volunteers to reform old *akiya* and create guesthouses for visitors.[106]

According to a report of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation, in 2017, over 40% of regional public organisations had set up an akiya bank (MLIT 2017b:12). On the other hand, their performance varies remarkably. According to a survey conducted in 2014 by Japan Organization for Internal Migration (JOIN 2014) on 374 local administrations, 14.1% of existing *akiya* banks had no properties registered, and 34.8% had between one and nine properties. *Akiya* banks' performance depends on several factors, including the year of establishment, size of the municipality, demographic-migratory patterns, etc. Such variability can be observed among *akiya* banks in eastern Nagano prefecture.[107]

In Nagano prefecture, the *akiya* rate decreased from 19.8% to 19.5% between 2013 and 2018. However, the prefecture still ranks third nation-wide following Yamanashi (21.3%) and Wakayama prefecture (20.3%) (MIC 2019b).[108] *Akiya* rates are not accurate indicators of the situation as they

[105] *Akiya* banks work in partnership with real estate associations and that is how they initially acquire properties. Prices vary, ranging from as little as one million yen to 30 million yen, but when the value of properties is too low real estate companies usually refuse to handle them. Until a law revision in 2018, agent handling fees were set at 5% on the sale value for sales up to two million yen (i.e. only 50,000 yen for a property worth one million yen). Handling fees have been now fixed at a minimum of 180,000 yen for sales up to one million yen.

[106] Up to 1,800,000 yen to reform an *akiya* to turn it into a guesthouse. Other financial measures include up 1,000,000 yen to help people renting one's house/room if you move into town, up to 100,000 yen for moving in expenses, a reduction of 50% of property taxes and 0.5 interest rates for loans to reform houses accessed through *akiya* banks.

[107] *Akiya* banks in Saku, Komoro, Tōmi, and Ueda were established in 2009, 2015, 2014, and 2015 respectively. As of February 2009, the total number of properties registered (including those currently listed) were 400, 211, 100, and 143 respectively.

[108] The national *akiya* rate in 2018 was 13.6% (MIC 2019b).

do not describe the relative distribution or state of vacant houses for rent/sale, second houses, and 'other vacant houses.' Nagano prefecture has, for instance, a high number of vacant holiday houses inflating the total *akiya* rate. In Tōmi city, the number of vacant houses decreased from 2,100 to 1,960 between 2008 and 2013. However, at the same time, the number of so-called 'troublesome *akiya'* (dangerous or otherwise troublesome buildings) increased by 550 units, coming to represent 66.3% of all *akiya* in 2013 (Tōmi-shi 2018b). Nagano prefecture has actively tackled the problem of empty houses in the past years. The prefecture is a popular destination among urban-rural migrants, and this arguably contributed to the performance of *akiya* banks as well as to lowering *akiya* rates in the past years.

According to *akiya* banks' employees in eastern Nagano, only a minority (5-10%) of homeowners are willing to lease their properties while the vast majority aim for a sale. Not only are landlords worried about nuisances involved in apartment management, but most properties require repairs to become liveable, and low rents in rural areas often do not justify the investment. Some tenants might be willing to shoulder the cost of reforms, but for landlords, this means it will be difficult to ask them to leave should they decide to sell in the future. Unlike homeowners, the majority of *akiya* banks' visitors are looking for properties for rent. *Akiya* are especially in demand among urban-rural migrants, who often do not have sufficient money to buy and reform an entire house or would rather avoid doing so right after their relocation. This mismatch between supply and demand is a major reason why many new settlers find it hard to access detached houses despite the growing number of vacant properties.

As the director of JA Ueda Farm told me, securing housing is usually harder than accessing farmland. Many people rent an apartment for the first few years after their relocation while looking for a suitable property. New entry farmers in particular need farmhouses with parking spaces for machinery and for the sorting-packing of farm products. For Sakagami san and his wife, a couple of new farmers who moved from Tokyo to Saku city in 2014, it took more than three years to find a house reasonably close to the farm. For Fuji san and his wife, finding a house in Tōmi city was also

quite tiresome. For many years they asked the older woman from whom they leased farmland to sell or rent them the *akiya* on the farm, but she always refused. Only when she died were they able to buy it from the daughter, who lived in Yokohama and was happy to sell. A new settler from Osaka living in Komoro city since 2017 told me that housing had become a source of discussion with his wife. 'She followed me here because she thought it would be different from life in the city. She hoped we could live in a country house and that our daughter could play in the yard, but we still live in a flat similar to the one where we lived in the city.'

Even for urban-rural migrants not working in agriculture, living in a farmhouse is part of the rural living dream. At the time 43 years old, Hiroyuki moved from Chiba prefecture to Tōmi in 2016. He is the manager of Omiyado, a renewed farmhouse turned into a guesthouse, and one of the most dynamic social hubs in town. For many years Hiroyuki dreamed of living in the countryside, growing his own food, and makeing his own miso. He travelled to many countries, and one of the things that he liked the most was people gathering to share meals in someone's house. 'Now in Japan, everyone lives alone or with their small family, but not too long ago extended families used to live together, share time, spaces, activities, and discuss a lot. Now houses are small and minimal. Compact is good, that's what most people think. This house is big, too big for most Japanese, but I love it. In a big house, you can invite people, you can spend long nights at the table. Everyone is free to come here just to spend a few hours on the veranda. I love having people around. Friends, travellers, children... Instead of creating walls and segregation, I think Japanese people should open up, beginning from their homes.'

Akiya banks have long waiting lists for detached houses for rent, and it can take many years before such properties become available. This is especially true for older, single settlers given *akiya* banks' policy of prioritising young couples. Some new settlers I met claimed that in rural villages word of mouth can be more effective than relying on real estate companies or *akiya* banks. 'Many homeowners are worried about a stranger living in their house or about selling to someone who might cause trouble to the neighbours. People in rural areas don't trust strangers, so

recommendations are very important. If you talk to people in the village and a local vouches for you, something will eventually come out.'

Akiya banks tend to focus on properties where people can live right away rather than on houses to be reformed. Requirements tend to become increasingly strict as *akiya* banks become more established. For instance, Saku city's *akiya* bank was set up earlier than those in the neighbouring towns. Not only does it not accept properties in bad condition, it also rejects properties for sale without up-to-date title registration (more on this below). Only a small share of the properties proposed by *akiya* owners can be used without major repairs (about 10% on average), so the majority of offers are declined. Damaged gas and water pipes are the most common problems. In Nagano prefecture, another issue is that vacant summer houses are extremely cold in the winter and thus difficult to market as all-year-long dwellings.

Because there is not much that can be done on houses in a poor structural state, the goal of *akiya* banks is to prevent their further increase. Advertisement is typically carried out through the city's website, radio, and circulating notices (*kairanban*). *Akiya* banks' employees lament lack of awareness of the problem of empty houses among rural residents, who often do not think of their house as an *akiya* when they use it as a storehouse. For instance, 25% of respondents to a survey conducted in Tōmi city on 293 owners of houses in an evident state of abandonment replied that their house was not an *akiya*. As for future plans, 44% of respondents did not intend to lease or sell it (Tōmi-shi 2018b). *Akiya* banks' employees also stressed the importance of preventing inheritance-related problems, a major reason for the proliferation of vacant houses. Wills can, for instance, avoid future quarrels between heirs. Old parents usually think their children will never get into a fight over inheritance, but this happens quite often as demonstrated by the growing number of litigations in family courts over inheritance division claims (Supreme Court of Japan 2018:26).

Unknown ownership

Farmland and house abandonment are particularly problematic because of Japan's normative framework surrounding land ownership. Because the law does not oblige heirs to register inherited property titles under their own name, much land and many houses all over the country are currently registered to dead title holders. As years pass and properties are passed to other heirs who also do not re-register the titles, ownership becomes divided among a growing number of people.[109] When local authorities need to contact absent landowners to solicit tax payments or acquire land for public projects, they may have to trace too many people. In Japan, there is no comprehensive system for organising and updating property records. Information is scattered on an array of different ledgers, including property registries, property tax registries, land registries, etc., which often are not up to date. For local authorities, consulting family registries and multiple ledgers to find heirs and their whereabouts often becomes a long, expensive, and often fruitless process (Yoshihara 2017).

The issue of unknown landownership emerged in the national mass media during reconstruction efforts in Tohoku following 3/11 disaster and in Kumamoto prefecture following a big earthquake in 2016. However, at the local level, this is not a new problem at all. Already in the early 1990s, absent forest owners represented more than 20% of the total, giving rise to problems of forest stewardship. In agriculture, the problem constitutes an obstacle to land consolidation measures and measures to prevent land abandonment. According to a survey published by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation in 2014 (MLIT 2014), land which registry information had not been updated in the past 50 years accounted for 19.8% of the total, while registry information that had not been updated for 30 to 49 years accounted for 26%. In other words, for at least 20% of national private land, corresponding to an area equivalent to that of all Kyushu, it has already become difficult to identify land ownership. This figure is confirmed by another national survey conducted by the MAFF in 2016, showing that 934,348 hectares of

[109] In Japanese, this dynamic is referred to as '*nezumi sanshiki*', an expression designating an old mathematical problem to calculate the proliferation of mice.

farmland (about 20% of all farmland nationwide) are registered to dead or likely dead title holders.[110]

Heirs have many reasons not to register their property title. First, the process is expensive and time-consuming. Inheritance tax (*tōroku menkyo zei*) amounts to 0.4% of a property's assessed value, and completing the title registration usually involves hiring a legal scrivener or a lawyer, with costs ranging between ¥40,000 and ¥100,000.[111] Completing a registration entails travelling to one's hometown and, in the case of multiple heirs, each one must give separate permission and provide a set of documents as well as their signature-seal. If even one of the heirs cannot be contacted or disagrees, the title cannot be changed. Notwithstanding the costs and time involved, there are no perceived benefits from completing the registration. Heirs can always change the titles should they need to sell the property. In eastern Nagano, while Saku *akiya* bank only takes in properties which titles are registered to the current owners, *akiya* banks in Komoro, Tōmi, and Ueda city allow owners not to change the titles until the sale agreement is settled.

As previously mentioned, excluding land designated as part of future urban development projects, the value of land and houses in rural Japan is extremely low. When registration costs are higher than eventual earnings derived from the sale, there is no economic incentive to register. For more and more people avoiding registering one's title actually becomes a way to cover one's tracks and avoid paying property taxes on unwanted inheritance. For local administrations, the growing number of absent, untraceable landlords is especially troublesome because they cannot collect property taxes. Property taxes account for about 40% of municipal tax revenues, and especially in small villages, the phenomenon is rapidly draining already depleted public purses (Yoshihara 2017:52).

[110] In some parts of the country, the situation is especially dire. For instance, according to a survey conducted in 2015 in Kagoshima prefecture, unregistered land amounted to 59,870 hectares, accounting for 38.2% of all prefectural farmland (Minami Nihon Shinbun 2016 June 31, in Nozawa 2016:43). As previously mentioned, *akiya* are often linked to problems of unknown ownership and absentee landlords. According to a survey conducted in 2015 on 300 *akiya* in Kakogawa city, Hyogo prefecture, 25% of them belonged to unknown landlords (Kobe Shinbun 2016 February 6, in Nozawa 2016:43).

[111] My online research.

As previously mentioned, unknown ownership also represents a main obstacle to addressing the problem of abandoned land/houses. This is the case in Tōmi city, where locating unknown or absentee landlords lists on top of the *akiya* measure plan published in 2018. At Ueda *akiya* bank, around 30% of registered properties have no updated title registration, but the person in charge thought that was not a worrisome figure. Though some local governments have introduced laws allowing them to acquire land if owners cannot be found, they still have to bear the cost of demolition themselves, and most simply do not have the money. The Ueda *akiya* bank representative said: 'More and more people stop paying property taxes, but only rarely are houses are taken by the city and sold. Their value is just too low.'

The problem of unknown, absent landlords further complicates addressing farmland abandonment. As more and more people die without designating a single successor for farmland in their will, by law the property is equally divided among heirs (further aggravating the problem of farmland fragmentation). When titles are not registered, and heirs live elsewhere, farmland cannot be used because the agreement of the majority of property rights holders is required for the lease of a house or a field.

During reconstruction efforts following the Tohoku 3/11 disaster, many municipalities facing problems related to unknown landownership requested a relaxation of regulations, but experts agree that the whole system must be reformed (Yoshihara 2017:38). Unfortunately, not only is the issue understudied and under-debated (it only emerged when dealing with natural disaster and reconstruction efforts), but because a substantial reform would touch many people's interests, it keeps being delayed. Similar to the problem of dangerous *akiya*, this is a public issue, but because private rights are involved, local administrations cannot intervene easily. There is also the question of which Ministry should be in charge of an eventual reform, given the overlapping jurisdiction of three ministries in land and titles: the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation, and the Ministry of Justice. The most imminent issue is arguably the reorganisation of property registries, with many experts arguing that title transfers should be made

compulsory and that fines should be put in place for those who do not comply.[112] Moreover, the array of registries and ledgers related to land matters should be gradually integrated and kept up to date. Because property registries have no compulsory system to update changes in title owners' addresses, even when the title transfer is done, it happens that landowners cannot be found. Other reforms that could ameliorate the problem of unknown or absentee landlords are described by Yoshihara (2017:148-154)[113].

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed the mounting problem of farmland and house abandonment in regional Japan and the paradox of new rural settlers struggling to access farmland and housing. Both issues have to do with property and the bundle of rights inherent to it. From an anthropological perspective, property refers to the many ways in which rights and obligations, privileges, and restrictions govern humans' dealings concerning resources and objects of value (Turner 2017:26). The value of objects is qualified according to socio-cultural perspectives and varies depending on the social relations inherent in it. Anthropologists look at the multiple functions of property and link it with kin structure, socio-political organization, and representation. As Turner

[112] According to Yoshihara (2017:142), however, there are two problems with this approach. First, making the registration compulsory clashes with Japan's public law general principle that property exchange is regulated and guaranteed by contracts between individuals and not by official registration as in the German system. Second, the fine should be higher than the cost of registering, which however depends on the value of the property. A less drastic measure might be that of simplifying the title registration procedure. *Hōmukyoku*, also known as *tōkisho*, are the local agencies of the Ministry of Justice where title registrations (*fudōsan tōki*) are completed (these include sales, inheritance, the building of new houses, plot divisions, etc.). Hōmukyoku were reduced from 1003 units in 1995 to 419 in 2015. Since 2004 the application can be made online, but for many older people the procedure is too complicated. According to Yoshihara, NPOs and public offices should provide support with the process.

[113] When a person who lives in another city dies, the death notification is not communicated to the city where he owns properties, so they cannot update property tax registries. Moreover, local administrations erase information on a residence from their residence registry (*jūmin kihon daichō*) when someone move their residence outside of the city. Furthermore, they only preserve information for five years. After that time, they do not have information about the owner of a house in their registry. Reforming these regulations could help local governments address the problem of absentee landlords. Finally, according to Yoshihara, Japan should face the reality of the increased number of people living in cities and inheriting land that they do not want. Since local administration do not accept donated farmland unless it has some use/value, it could be argued that it is time to create a system that allows land to return to be everyone's property and a plan to employ it for the good of the community.

(2017:30) points out, 'this does not mean excluding the normative aspects of property regulation; rather, it includes the normativity that property itself generates.'

The bundle of rights surrounding farmland in Japan is influenced by the heritage of interdependence characterising rural communities. Compared to Western countries, the farming community has a greater say on how farmland should be used, and landowners feel entitled to question tenants' doing to a level that elsewhere would be considered unacceptable. Kinship and prestige emerge as strong ideological drives influencing the way property is conceived and dealt with. Landlords are often reluctant to sell or lease properties as this would affect their reputation and that of the household. Reluctance to transfer farmland is often explained through the importance placed on household continuity (e.g. Moore 1990; Iwamoto 2003 Uchiyama 2014), yet millions of hectares of farmland sold and converted to other uses since the end of the War stand as counterevidence to the narrative portraying farmers as deeply involved in household duties. This apparent paradox sees on one side *greedy landowners* eager to sell farmland to the highest bidder and, on the other, *stubborn farmers* attached to their possessions and wanting to preserve the family's heritage. Rather than relying on personal traits to explain this discrepancy, the matter should be understood in terms of social norms tacitly demarcating what is considered appropriate behaviour. While selling farmland for agricultural use at a low price is generally considered despicable, selling farmland at a high price after converting it to other uses is more widely accepted.

Japan is entering an era in which, for many people, owning a property is no longer an asset but a liability. Farmland and house abandonment are among the consequences of this transition and the source of numerous problems. While the lowering value of real property all over the country primarily derives from demographic change, property abandonment is mostly the consequence of social norms, practices, and the normative framework surrounding land ownership. Together with social norms inhibiting property transfers, legislation regulating property ownership, taxation, and inheritance is shown to play a key role in Japan's land crisis. Customs and practices involved in homebuilding and urban development planning are also central in explaining the phenomenon.

Land and home abandonment are widely recognised as problematic, but vested interests, ideological resistance, and bureaucratic path dependence hinder the reform process. Significantly, and in contrast with norms and practices surrounding farmland use, Japan appears to be strongly protective of private property rights, with local administrations reluctant to enforce regulations that are prejudicial to homeowners.

More than accessing farmland, securing detached houses in rural areas appears to be the greatest struggle faced by pro-rural migrants and new entry farmers in particular. Farmland access is likely to become even less of an issue in the coming years due to the progressive shrinkage of Japan's farming population. Excluding some organic farmers facing discrimination, difficulties in accessing farmland appear not to be a key element accounting for low-income levels among new agricultural entrants from the city. The next Chapter considers farming know-how and problems involved in its acquisition.

Chapter 5

Acquiring farming know-how: quality, labour, and enskilment

More than access to farmland, capital, or markets, new entry farmers indicate insufficient farming skills as the greatest problem they face (NCA 2017:58). This chapter discusses the acquisition of farming know-how by aspiring farmers from the city, complicated by an emphasis on quality and aesthetics in Japan's fresh food market. The first part of the chapter focuses on farming practices and the peculiar evolution of fruit production and consumption in Japan. The analysis shows how the reproduction of farming practices and consumption habits, naturalised as the product of tradition and the expression of culture, is primarily driven by policy as an expression of economic interests. Emphasis on quality and aesthetics in Japan's fresh food market informs production standards and complicates the acquisition of farming know-how, which becomes a significant barrier to entry in agriculture. The second part of the chapter discusses difficulties involved in acquiring-refining farming skills and training routes available to aspiring farmers. Different 'communities of practice' influence the way individuals experience their transition as well as the assimilation of knowledge, norms, and values. The case of JA Ueda Farm is discussed in detail, providing an example of how agricultural cooperatives contribute to addressing the problem of farmland abandonment and generational renewal in agriculture.

Growing perfect fruit

Nagano prefecture counts numerous fruit production areas, and many aspiring farmers from the city choose it for this reason. The trainee cohort at JA Ueda Farm was no exception, with ten out of thirteen trainees focusing on table grape, wine grape, or apple. Fruit is popular among new entrants from the city because it is less physically demanding than vegetables and can be profitably grown on very small plots. On the other hand, fruit farming in Japan is extremely labour intensive and requires a high level of expertise compared to other crops. Because fruit must comply with high

aesthetic standards, fruit farming is similar to a form of craft. 'Farmers spend their whole life refining their skills. In this respect, they are very similar to artisans.'[114] The learning curve for new entrants is steep, especially considering that, unlike vegetables, fruit is only harvested once a year. For the head of Ueda's centre for the promotion of agriculture, it takes at the very least five to six years and usually eight to ten years to become proficient growers.

Fruit farming in Japan is extremely labour intensive. There are two reasons for low levels of mechanisation: the fact that farms are extremely small, so investment in machinery is difficult to amortise, and the fact that the extremely high-quality standards of Japan's fruit market render a remarkable amount of manual labour unavoidable. One of the first tasks trainees were assigned at the beginning of their training in April was to clean up a field recently acquired by JA Ueda Farm. The team, supervised by Koizumi san, was composed of five trainees and myself. The field, about 3,000m2 in size, was located in the middle of several building lots in the most typical pattern of Japan's countryside, a patch of residential land and farmland. It looked as if the field had been abandoned for years. Thick shrubs covered the whole area and wines entirely submerged the crumbling net enclosing it. I was surprised to hear that it had been left idle for only two years and was once again reminded of the difference between weed growth in continental Europe and subtropical Japan. The shrubs spreading all over the field were mostly *bidens*, an annoying weed producing sticky, spiky seeds that are difficult to remove from fabric. Koizumi san gave us three brush cutters (which, I would will soon learn, are the most important piece of equipment of Japanese farmers) and grass sickles. Facing the impenetrable forest, I was the only one looking puzzled. Were we really supposed to clean up that mess with brush cutters and grass sickles? A tractor with a mower/shredder attachment was on its way. Not only was I wrong, but I would not see any tractor-operated mower from that day. Every bit of weeding, no matter how overwhelming, was performed by hand using tools that, in my experience, are generally employed in home gardening. Koizumi san explained to trainees, who had never used a brush cutter, how to handle

[114] Interview with an official of Tōmi city's government - office of agriculture-forestry.

one. A little later, we were at work, opening our path through the weeds. We soon found ourselves covered in sweat and sticky seeds, piercing through our gloves and skin. Every twenty minutes or so, we had to stop and remove them. Without a breath of wind, the smell of burned gasoline produced by brush cutters filled the air around us. The shrubs were quite thick and already lignified at the base, so cutting them required a remarkable amount of physical strength. When the mid-morning break finally came, we sat contemplating our work. In two hours, six people had cleared about one-third of the field and the net.

Cleaning of a field using brush cutters.

Kusa-kari (weeding) is no doubt one of the keywords of Japanese agriculture. Farmers are always busy with *kusa-kari*. 'Ah, I am late with weeding!' is one of the most common complaints you hear from farmers. Japan's climate is responsible for the rapid proliferation of weeds, but, despite this disadvantageous condition, in Japanese small farms, weeding is mostly carried out

manually using brush cutters.[115] For most fruit farmers it is uneconomical to purchase larger machinery due to the small size of their orchards. Not only do 56% of full-time fruit farmers operate on an area of less than 1ha (MAFF 2019b:8), but these micro-farms are usually composed of several small plots. Fruit farming often developed in semi-mountainous and mountainous regions like Nagano (as well as in northern Japan) where the climate is more suitable (i.e. dry). Orchards tend to be small and hilly, typically less than one third of a hectare.[116] Together with brush cutters, farmers also employ small riding mowers for weeding. However, these represent a significant investment for new entrants, who often keep relying exclusively on brush cutters for many years. Riding mowers are used to clean rows, while brush cutters are used to clean inter-rows between trees. I once asked why no one used tractor attachments such as inter-row mowers/cultivators. Many people had never heard of such a thing and were quite amazed when I showed them pictures. I was told that there is no market for such 'fancy machinery' in Japan and that only 'rich people' can afford tractors in fruit agriculture. Japan's market for farming machinery represents a classic example of Galapagos syndrome. Manufacturers such as Kubota developed unique machinery tailored to small Japanese farms and produced peculiar items such as man-driven sprayers, something I had never seen or heard of before.[117]

As previously mentioned, low degrees of mechanisation also stem from producing perfect fruits for Japan's market requires a tremendous amount of meticulous, manual work.[118] In Ueda district and Nagano prefecture overall, apple and grape are the most common fruit.[119] They provide examples of how labour-intensive fruit farming can get. Unlike commercial farms in other

[115] Tractors and mower attachments are more common in large farms. Farming in extensive crops is more mechanised, but manual weeding is still common even in paddy field agriculture. Rice fields' edges are usually very thin, so tractors cannot operate. Paddy fields were established in a time in which tractors did not exist, and the relative scarcity of farmland meant that edges were built as thin as possible. Nowadays it would be possible to enlarge them to allow tractors in, but this is expensive and is mostly done in larger farms.
[116] In Italy, a country of smallholdings by international standards, commercial orchards are seldom smaller than 2-3ha.
[117] These machines are expensive and dangerous: they are less stable than a tractor, and there is no cabin to protect the operator form sprayed chemicals.
[118] It must be noted that Japan's humid climate and the presence of some formidable insects complicates fruit farming, and that extra labour is partly due to this reason.
[119] Apple is number one per area in Nagano (7900ha in 2014) and represents 53% of all fruit orchards. Grape is number two per area (2400ha in 2014) (Nagano ken 2016).

industrialised countries to my knowledge, thinning in fruit is typically performed manually. Thinning begins in April and for most fruit trees consists of three main phases: *hanatsumi* (removal of flowers), *aratteikika* (removal of small fruits), *shiageteikika* (later removal of fruits that are too small, damaged, or too close to other fruits). Thinning is generally referred to as *tekika* (or *tekka*). Together with *kusakari*, *tekika* is one of the words you regularly hear in a fruit production region. *Tekika* never ends. It is an interminable task that continues uninterrupted from April to July.

This is how *aratteikika*, the most time-consuming phase, is performed in apple trees. Hanging on aluminium ladders called *sankyaku*/*kyatatsu* (tripod), you search in the tree for each fruit cluster. Out of the five small fruits on each cluster, you choose the strongest (usually the central one) and remove the rest by hand or using small scissors. Many clusters are removed entirely, because, as a rule of thumb, you only want one apple each 30-40 cm along the branch. However, this also depends on fruit concentration in proximal branches and on the larger 'branch cluster.' You favour apples growing on new shoots composed as follows: 20cm of a lignified branch, the apple, and 20cm of a shoot covered by leaves. The terminal part must be sufficiently long, but not too long, so that leaves do not take too much energy away from apples. All this sounds complicated, and it is. It takes many years before all these calculations become more intuitive (i.e. fast) and for that one truly has to develop a new 'sense of space' (the tree) or, following Gibson (1979), a 'skilled vision.' Not only is *tekika* quite complicated, but also repetitive and time-consuming. Why is fruit thinning performed manually? The answer I always got was 'quality'. I have heard that some farmers rely on chemical thinning (*yakuzai tekika*). However, everyone claimed it is impossible to achieve the same level of precision, so even farmers using chemicals still have to correct it manually.

Other farming practices unheard of in the rest of the world, to my knowledge, are *hatsumi* (leaf removal) and *hirotsuke* (colouring). To achieve a perfectly even colour for their apples, farmers remove nearby leaves and twigs that might block sun rays and twist each apple 180 degrees on their stem so that all sides receive equal amounts of light. Sometimes aluminium tarps are laid

beneath the trees to bounce sun rays, ensuring that apples' undersides are also perfectly coloured.[120] Apple farmers used to place paper bags around apples to protect them from insects and weather, but the practice is gradually disappearing, at least for apples.[121] Labour intensive practices continue during harvest. It is vital to pick apples correctly so that the stem remains intact. Apples can lose half of their value without it. Many apples are discarded, either left on the ground or allocated to processing. The remaining ones are brought to a sorting area and divided manually into groups by size and shape-colour. At Ueda Farm, the otherwise good-looking ones with too much green coloured surface went into 3.5kg packages to be sold at the local JA *chokubaijo* (direct sales store), the perfect ones for to wholesale market, and the outstanding ones as gift fruit.

Grape farming (table grape) is possibly even more labour-intensive. In April-May, new shoots from grape trees are selected, and the majority removed (*mekaki*). In order to have only one bunch per branch, thinning of bunches (*tekibō*) is then performed. Next comes the removal of about 70% of the top flowers of each bunch (as well as a few flowers on the very tip), so that only the bottom 4-5cm of flowers develop into grapes (*fusakiri*). Small bunches are very delicate in this phase, and removing part of them using thumb and index fingers requires great care and dexterity. Japanese consumers these days prefer seedless grape, so each flowering bunch is then submerged in a cup containing a hormone liquid that inhibits seed development (*jiberin no shōri*). Each treated bunch is then marked with a small coloured clip and delicately shaken so that the liquid drains away, avoiding sunburn (water lens-effect).[122] As grapes develop, individual bunches are trimmed using small scissors so the fewer grapes can grow larger without squeezing each other (*tekiryu*). The goal is to have 30-35 grapes per bunch. After that, a paper bag is wrapped around each bunch to protect it from insects and weather. A small plastic umbrella is then placed on top. This is already time-consuming as it is, but fruit bagging can further increase labour hours later on in the season. In

[120] These practices are also common for other fruits, such as peaches and pears.
[121] Placing bags around young Asian pears to protect them is said to be a technique that has been practiced since the Tokugawa period.
[122] On the contrary, some orchards are purposefully chosen to produce grape with seeds, which is still appreciated by older consumers. In this case, bunch thinning is performed later in the season so that during grape growth trees have more fruits to 'feed'. This triggers extra seed development.

August a fungus had developed in some of the orchards, so we had to unwrap every single bunch, lift the umbrella, remove compromised grapes one by one with scissors, and put everything back in place. Excluding some shoots and bunches thinning, none of this is performed in grape farming in other countries to my knowledge. Italian farmers I described this practice to considered it 'madness.' After the harvest, small grape bunches that developed later in the season are also removed to prevent them from 'draining trees' energy' before the winter (*niba nari*). This is another practice that is unheard of outside of Japan to my knowledge. Another peculiar practice adding to labour time is the scaping of vines' bark performed in spring using little knife-like utensils. The bark must be entirely cleaned from its bark layer so that pest insects cannot depose eggs underneath it. The sorting of grape bunches after the harvest is also incredibly time-consuming. After bags are unwrapped, damaged grapes are removed one by one. White haloes (residues of spraying) are then carefully removed with a small brush. Bunch stems are shortened to 4cm, and then bunches are weighed to be sorted by size and 'beauty' (i.e. 'balance'). The number of size classes reveals the degree of punctiliousness.[123] Each bunch is placed in a plastic tray, wrapped with a tape to keep the bunch steady, then wrapped with a plastic sheet.

[123] Small bunches for 'normal packages' are divided into 'normal' (250-319g), L size (320-349g), and LL size (350-399g), while best bunches are divided into L (420-449g > 12 bunches packages), LL (450-499g > 11 bunches), 3L (500-549g > 10 bunches), and 550+g (8-9 bunches).

Wrapping grape bunches with paper bags.

Grape removal using scissors.

The above examples give an idea of how labour-intensive fruit farming is in Japan. For those unfamiliar with the subject, it is useful to provide a term of comparison. According to statistics released by Nagano prefecture, 10*are* (1,000m2) of Fuji apple require 260 hours of work

(2,600h/ha), while 10are of Shine Muscat grapes require 352 hours (3.520h/ha) (Nagano-ken 2018). In Emilia-Romagna, a fruit production region in Italy, average working hours for one hectare of apple orchard range between 440h (plain areas) and 616h (mountainous areas) (Emilia-Romagna 2010). Even taking the highest value, apple farming in Japan requires 4.2 times the number of hours per area. Table grape farming in Italy requires on average 700 hours/ha for open-filed orchards. In this case, grape farming in Japan is five times more labour-intensive. Because of this incredible amount of manual labour, one person can only manage a tiny area. It is not by coincidence that the above figures are expressed in *are* rather than in hectares. Nagano prefecture's centre for agricultural promotion indicates that the recommended area one person can farm is 0.5ha for apple and 0.15ha for grape. In Italy, a smallholding agricultural country by international standards, a 0.15ha (1,500m2) orchard would be considered hobby farming. In Japan, one reason why grape is so popular among new entrants is that it can be grown profitably in a very small area. Farmland access is problematic for new agricultural entrants, and labour-intensive fruit represents a more viable option. The above examples offer a glimpse of the expertise required to grow perfect fruits and the importance of training. Rather than farmland or capital, farming skills arguably represent the most significant barrier to entry in fruit agriculture.

Why has fruit farming evolved in such a peculiar way? Why are quality standards so high? Old records from the late 6th century AC indicate that at the time various fruits were already grown in Japan, including native grape (*yama budou*), peaches, plum, persimmon, tachibana citrus, chestnut, and walnut (Kobayashi 1986:58). On the other hand, fruit has never been a staple in Japan, but rather a luxury. Fruit has been long classified as *kashi* (sweets) and often referred to as *mizugashi* (water confection) (MAFF 2015b:1). There are several reasons for this, most notably the fact that Japan's humid climate is not particularly suitable for fruit growing. It has also been argued that, because the wide availability of clean water, Japanese people did not need to eat fruit as a source of water as in other countries (e.g. in the Mediterranean area) (Kitagawa 1994). The Edo period (1603–1867) was characterised by growing economic prosperity and saw a remarkable

diffusion of fruit farming, along with the flourishing of Japan's culinary culture. Production areas associated with specific products began to appear: persimmon from Nara, grape from Yamanashi, peaches from Kyoto, pears from Nigata, and mikan (tangerines) from Wakayama. However, the economic disparity between elites and commoners, and between major cities and rural areas were still significant, so fruit remained a delicacy for the rich. This was also true for the Meiji era when Japan started to cultivate many new fruit trees imported from abroad such as apple, melon, pear, grape, strawberry, and honey peaches trees (Kobayashi 1986:40). In this period, horticultural studies developed in order to integrate foreign cultivars, create new breeds, and develop new farming techniques. The introduction of fruit cultivation in many peripheral regions of Japan contributed to the revitalisation of the local economies and shape regional identities (e.g. apples in Aomori).[124] It was only after the end of the Second World War that fruit became available to the broader public. Thanks to developments in the chemical and manufacturing industries leading to increased productivity and the growing purchasing power of Japan's expanding middle class, total fruit production rose from 50,000 tons in 1945 to 500,000 tons in 1969 (Kobayashi 1986:62). In this period the MAFF promoted planting fruits as side-line production in mountainous regions, often on marginal land unsuitable for rice cultivation.[125] Fruit per capita consumption rose steadily until the mid-1970s, but since then has progressively declined and in 2017 stood at 34.2kg/year (MAFF 2019b:14).

Fruit consumption in Japan remains remarkably low compared to most countries.[126] This is partly due to Japan's history and culinary culture conceiving of fruit as a delicacy or a dessert. For instance, apples are rarely consumed whole in Japanese households, but cut into slices and shared by all family members.[127] However, the primary reason for low fruit consumption in Japan is

[124] These histories are very interesting and often centred around remarkable figures from the ex-samurai class. For instance, the development of strawberries by Hayto Fukuba (1856-1921) (Begin Japanology May 30 2013) and that of apples by Kikuchi Tatee (1846-1912) (Brucklacher 1999:54-56).
[125] Another example is mulberry production, which disappeared because of the decline of the silk industry.
[126] In 2010, Japan's per capita intake of fresh fruit was only 52kg, as compared with 77 kg in China and 129kg in Italy. Consumption is higher for people in their 60s and over 70s, and lower for people in their 20s and 30s (MAFF 2019d:14).
[127] Cultural practices influence consumption trends in many ways. For instance, in Japan, apples are always peeled before being consumed, making them a less convenient food for snacking on. This limits apple consumption relative to other fruits.

arguably its high price. Surveys corroborate this hypothesis (Chūō Kajitsu Kyōkai 2019:26).[128] One might argue that the persistence of high prices is in turn, the reason why fruit perception and consumption practices (i.e. 'food culture') remain mostly unchanged. In other words, the self-reinforcing loop 'fruit is expensive because it is conceived as a delicacy – fruit is considered a delicacy because it is expensive', with the latter more prevalent.

High prices are on the one hand influenced by high consumers' expectations on quality determining high production costs, and, on the other hand, by Japan's protectionist trade policy. Not all fruits in Japan are expensive. Exceptions are tropical and subtropical fruits that are hard to grow domestically and are therefore imported, such as banana, kiwi, avocado, pineapple, lemon, grapefruit, etc. When first allowed into the country in the late 1960s, bananas had devastating effect on Japan's fruit market, and apple growers experienced some of their worst years ever (Brucklacher 2001:234).[129] Not only are bananas or kiwis available throughout the year at consistent, relatively low prices, but they are also easier to consume (i.e. peel) compared to fruits like apples. Convenience is an increasingly important feature in fruit for Japanese consumers.[130] Fruit imports slowly continued to grow amid protests,[131] but from 2004 until recently, yearly volumes entered a plateau.[132] Imports currently outpace domestic production in terms of volume, but in terms of value, the domestic market is much larger.[133] This is because, while about 90% of domestic produce is sold on the fresh market, over half of imported produce is used in the processing industry (e.g.

[128] The majority of respondents indicate high prices as the primary reason why they do not consume more fruit.
[129] Apple overproduction and banana competition caused apple prices to drop to the extent that apple growers coined the phrase 'the mountain and river market' (*yama gawa shijō*) suggesting that prices were so low that farmers could as well dump apples in the rivers or mountains (Brucklacher 2001:234).
[130] Less large families and more individuals/nuclear families means that traditional fruits are losing their popularity. Singles and couples can hardly consume whole melons or watermelons.
[131] Pressure from the United States and New Zealand throughout the 1980s and early 1990s resulted in quarantines being lifted for certain varieties of apples, and in1994 limited imports of New Zealand-grown apples began to arrive at Japanese ports. Growers protested vigorously. News reports covered angry rallies led by Aomori apple growers who feared the lower prices of imports would drive them out of business and threatened devastation stemming from 'foreign' diseases such as fire blight and Codlin moth. In Tokyo markets, the new fruit did enjoy a brief period of curiosity buying. Sales have subsequently dropped sharply, however, and in 1997 only a few tons of New Zealand apples entered Japan. Foreign growers blame their lack of success on the continuation of strict phytosanitary measures. The largest source of contention since 1994 has been the quarantine tests required on individual varieties. Only Golden and Red Delicious, varieties not particularly favoured by Japanese consumers, passed the long quarantine process after decades of failed inspections (Brucklacher 1999:72).
[132] Arguably, because the Japanese population started declining as well as per capita fruit consumption. The 2008 financial crisis also contributed to lowering consumption trends. In the past few years, however, imports have begun to rise again (details below).
[133] In 2015, Japan produced 2.9 million tons of fruit and imported 4.3 million tons, but while the value of the domestic market was $7.6billion, total import value was $2.1billion (MAFF 2019d).

juices, canned food, fruit salad) (MAFF 2019b).[134] Trade restrictions have been used to protect the domestic fresh fruit market and represent an important price factor. Japan limits the import of fresh fruit through tariffs and strict phytosanitary rules. [135] The latter, in particular, prevent access for several fruits into Japan's market.[136] However, not only have fresh fruit imports begun to increase in recent years, but the enforcement of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in December 2018 and the consequent lowering of tariffs among participating countries means this trend is likely to accelerate in the coming years. Until 2012, apple imports to Japan had been close to zero, but since then begun to increase and in 2018 reached 4,200tons (Agri Journal 2 October 2018). The trigger was the harvest failure and consequent supply shortage of 2012. Supermarkets had to rely on imported produce (mostly from New Zealand) and now want to continue doing it. Pandora's box has been opened and can no longer be sealed.

Not only is there a shortage of domestic apples between May and July, but foreign produce is relatively cheap and small in size (therefore more convenient to eat), features that consumers much appreciate. Since December 2018, tariffs on apple from CPTPP countries fell from 17% to 11.4%, making foreign produce even more convenient. While in late spring and summer, domestic cold-storage apples sold in supermarkets in major Japanese cities cost on average 300yen each, New Zealand apples only cost 100yen (Nōgyō Shinbun 29 August 2019). Table grape import has also been increasing in recent years following poor harvests in Japan. Major suppliers are the USA, Chile, Australia, with the latter two enjoying the advantage of the seasonal difference. In 2018

[134] Bananas represent over half of the total value of imported fresh fruit.
[135] Japan's tariffs on fruit range from 0 to 32 per cent of the value. In general, tariffs are highest on fresh oranges, bananas, pineapples, tangerines, and grapes. The highest tariff applies to oranges imported between December and May when Japan's main citrus crop is marketed. For all fruit (fresh, dried, frozen, or provisionally preserved) the tariff for least-developed countries is zero. For developing countries, tariffs are lower than those applied to developed countries (USDA 2010:11-12).
[136] Japan prohibits fruit imports from many parts of the world due to 17 pests that may be found in or on the product. Some countries, notably the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Korea, and Chile, have negotiated exceptions to trade bans on some fruits. For instance, Japan permits imports of apples, cherries, plums, and nectarines from the United States if shipped directly, meeting standards set by the MAFF. US apricots and peaches, among other fruits, are not allowed entry because of codling moth concerns, and US pears are barred because of both codling moth and fire blight. The United States' ability to export apples, cherries, plums, and nectarines has involved protracted negotiations with Japan. From 1994 to 2005, apples grown for Japanese markets could only come from certain US growing areas and specific parts of orchards separated by 10-meter buffers from trees bearing apples not designated for Japanese markets. Orchard inspections by MAFF officials at the small fruit stage, chlorine dips, fumigation, and post-harvest inspection all added to the cost of producing such apples. Negotiations with the United States and other trading partners, followed by a WTO case which Japan lost, led to the adoption of a less restrictive, but still onerous, system in August 2005 that includes 55 days of cold treatment, fumigation, and intensive inspections by MAFF officers. As of 2010, of the 19 major fruits produced in Japan, eight fruit crops see no import activity as a result of strict phytosanitary barriers (USDA 2010:14).

import reached 37.000 tons, the highest level ever recorded (Nōgyō Shinbun 4 May 2019), and 2019 scored yet a new record. In the first five months of 2019, import volumes were already 32% higher than in 2018, most likely as a consequence of CPTPP enforcement (Nōgyō Shinbun 28 June 2019).

Border measures contribute to raising the price for domestic produce, but Japanese market's quality (aesthetic) standards contribute to pushing prices even higher. High production costs are involved in growing perfect fruit. Given its 'delicacy' status, fruit had long been used as a seasonal gift in Japan. This custom developed in the early Edo period and is still widespread. Japan counts numerous festivities involving gift-giving and edibles often provide the perfect gift-giving solution due to their perishable, discrete nature. Fruit, in particular, is unassuming and generally well-liked. Fruit is also something of known value, a desirable feature for gifts as price-appropriateness is important in Japan's gift-giving culture (Daniels 2009). Monthly expenditure for fruit is especially high in July, August, and December, corresponding with the major festivals such as *obon* and year end. While fruit consumption in Japan has gradually fallen, the ratio of gift fruit (*zōtō-yō kudamono*) has increased, and in 2010, the market value for gift fruit stood at 280million yen (Isoshima 2016:132). Fruits sold as gifts must be flawless in appearance and, of course, delicious. First-time visitors to Japan are often bewildered by high-end speciality fruit stores found in department stores. Items on display are individually wrapped and cushioned, and the impression is more that of being in a jewellery store than in a fruit market. Prices reinforce this impression, with peaks such as a 1million yen (roughly £800) for a bunch of grapes, as I witnessed in a fruit parlour in Tokyo.

Expensive grape bunches in a fruit parlour in Tokyo.

Expensive melons in a fruit parlour in Tokyo.

Because fruit used for gifts sells at a premium price that can be several times higher than that of 'regular' fruit, producers have an incentive to target the high-end gift market. Japan's fruit market is stratified, but quality standards tend to be very high throughout all major distribution channels. Even in supermarkets, instead of piles of produce sold by weight, fruit is typically tucked in attractive box sets, sealed in plastic wrap, or nestled in individual foam wrappers. This reinforces the idea that fruit should have certain aesthetic characteristics, in turn contributing to the image of fruit as a delicacy rather than a staple. While fruit is certainly the most impressive example, an obsession for perfection characterises the Japanese food market in general. In supermarkets, vegetables are typically devoid of any dirt or scratches, and are perfectly uniform in shape, colour and size.[137] The quest for perfect produce escalated to the point that minor flaws relegate excellent produce to bargain bins, juice processors, or other cheap outlets. This state of things is undesirable for many consumers, who lament high prices and lack of choice imposed by food retailers' buying practices. Most people I met on fieldwork agreed that Japanese consumers are too fixated with food aesthetics and considered the downgrading of otherwise good fruit as a 'waste' (*mottainai*). At the same time, I often discerned a hint of pride when people explained to me that the Japanese grow fruit differently (i.e. better) than in other countries.

Why is the Japanese market not more stratified if demand for less-than-perfect produce exists? There are several reasons, including the fact that supermarkets fear that their image would be negatively affected by selling defective/unpacked fruit.[138] In other words, image loss would not

[137] Apart from aesthetics qualities, Japanese people are overall very strict about food taste. I often witnessed this on fieldwork. Japanese people living in the countryside are extremely picky about food products. I am not sure about urban consumers who, as Godo (2012) puts it, have now lost their palate, but most people I met in Nagano had a clear idea of what good vegetable and fruit should look and taste like. Chizuko bāchan was the mother of my landlord. Being from a good family in the village, she would constantly receive gifts from neighbours and friends. Gifts were often edibles, and she would outspokenly assess and comment on their quality with me. One day she received some asparagus from an old customer of the guesthouse from Hokkaido. After a quick look she decreed that those asparagus where too thick and that they were not even half as good as those grown in Nagano. That evening we tried them, and she concluded that Hokkaido is a good place for growing potatoes, not vegetables. She would often remind me that rice and vegetable from Komoro are much better than that of Tōmi (the neighbouring town just 1km away) because in Komoro they have silky soil that is harder to cultivate, but that will ensure superior taste. When she was young, she used to work in her family apple orchard, so apples were her true area of expertise. I love apples, she used to say, I could live of apples alone. One day I brought home some apples from a nearby farm. She looked at them severely and asked me where they came from. I told her they were from Mori san orchard (a neighbour farmer). She laughed and said that Mori san doesn't know how to prune trees. I replied that, although the apples had a few bumps and were not evenly coloured, the taste was good. She gazed at me, tried a little slice, and said they were not sweet enough. Since that day I brought home apples from different orchards run by JA to hear her critique.

[138] Many people dislike the idea of unpacked fruit that might have been touched and put back in the pile.

be compensated by extra sales of low-quality niche produce. A partial exception is represented by so-called '*wakeari'* produce. *Wake-ari* literally means 'there is a reason', that is, a reason why the produce is damaged. In the case of fresh food, produce damaged by pest or weather that would be normally disposed of or used for processing is sometimes marketed as *wakeari* and sold at a lower price in supermarkets and other food retailers.[139] On the other hand, there is a difference between damaged produce sold at a discounted price as a form of corporate social responsibility, and fruit sold and produced at lower quality standards by design. Why is the latter so inconceivable? I once asked this exact question to my landlord and his mother. Why does no one grows lower-quality apples that might earn less per unit, but overall more per area? They were quite shocked. 'Who on earth would buy apples like that?' my landlord replied. 'That would be so miserable! I would be ashamed to put an apple like that on the table.' The grandma was much blunter, 'Such apples would only be good for the monkeys at the zoo.'

Despite what some people might think, the answer to the above question is not ultimately to be found in consumers' preferences or retailers' procurement policy. Opposition to a more stratified supply seems to come first of all from producers. Producers' groups and agricultural cooperatives are unwilling to supply less-than-perfect fruit. Results of a survey conducted in 2012 by the Japan's Central Fruit Association (Chūō Kajitsu Kyōkai 2013:23) show that producers do not want to lower quality standards because this would lower overall prices and ruin local brands. Fruit farming in Japan has always been centred on quality, and farmers take pride in their craftsmanship. Everything is built around this goal and changing it would cause much disruption. Although low mechanisation is indeed due to high-quality standards, one might look at this the other way around: quality standards are so high precisely because farms cannot be mechanised. Labour-intensive farming is perfect for Japan's micro orchards. It is because fruit is all about quality that farmers can (more or less) live out of small farms. If the competition was based on price rather than quality, this would

[139] Sometimes products with a close expiry date are also marketed as '*wakeari'*. *Wakeari* fresh food is now quite common in Japan, but according to people I talked with its popularity have been recently decreasing. Unfortunately, I could not find statistics.

no longer be possible. Farms would have to expand, but they would soon hit the wall of inefficiencies derived from land fragmentation and labour shortage. Japanese producers want to compete on quality, not on price. They want to avoid the race to the bottom. Instead of cutting costs wherever they can, they have invested in regional branding[140] and in the development of new fruit varieties.[141] Fruit producers are worried about lowering prices above everything. Already in the late 1960s, they learned that overproduction could lead to daunting price drops (Kobayashi 1986:144) and ever since then MAFF implemented measures to stabilise prices for tangerines and apples, Japan's major fruit crops. Prices are kept artificially stable (high) through production control mechanisms. Each year the MAFF set production and shipment levels based on the supply-demand situation and prompts agricultural cooperatives to adjust their production plans (typically through culling) to meet goals for the season (Chūō Kajitsu Kyōkai 2018).[142] Production control measures are closely linked to Japan's quest for quality in fruit farming.

Working on farms I was often puzzled by everyone's insistence of fruit thinning. JA agronomists (*shidō-sha*) in particular encourage farmers to thin without second thoughts. '*Otoshite-ne!* (Drop them)' '*Mayottara otoshite*. (If you are in doubt, just drop it).' When asking whether it was really necessary to thin so much, everyone kept telling me it was for the sake of quality. 'If you don't thin properly, fruits won't be as sweet and juicy, and trees won't be productive the following year.' I am no agronomist, but I know apples, peaches, and grapes can be equally delicious, even when there is more than one fruit per branch, and of course, trees can stay productive.[143] Was all that thinning just for the sake of quality, or was it part of a tacit agreement to limit production? My

[140] Nagano prefecture's fruit agriculture promotion plan still lists branding and product differentiation as key ways to add product value and improve producers' income (Nagano ken 2016:19).
[141] Strawberry provides a good example. Today 39 out of 47 prefectures grow their own breeds. Japanese consumer taste is fickle: for example, the popularity of a single strawberry variety typically last less than 15 years. Producers and production regions have to keep developing new varieties. In this context, research and development centres are key to regional agriculture (Begin Japanology 30 May 2013).
[142] Farmers who participate in the project are eligible for subsidies covering half the costs incurred in culling operations. At harvest, if Japan's total production exceeds the adequate market level, growers and cooperatives are asked to divert some product to the processing sector and are eligible for compensations (USDA 2010:8; Chūō Kajitsu Kyōkai 2018; MAFF 2019d:32).
[143] I was sometimes surprised to find some of those perfect fruits quite tasteless. All that pampering and fruit does not even taste good?

impression is that farmers genuinely believed they had to trim so much for the sake of quality and that they had been led to believe so.

Fruit has a high elasticity of demand for price increases and low elasticity for price drops. In other words, when supply is abundant, prices immediately drop, but when supply shrinks, consumers find substitute goods and prices do not rise much. This means that supply must be carefully tuned to achieve the best results (that is, for farmers). Coordination among major production areas is fundamental in order to produce the right amount and to avoid concentrating shipments to wholesale markets in the same period. The MAFF openly emphasises the importance of cooperation between production areas (including branding) in its white papers (MAFF 2015b:17-19). Nagano prefecture's fruit agriculture promotion plan explicitly refers to the importance of coordination with Tohoku apple producers (Nagano ken 2016:17). Price control measures are an example of the still dirigiste approach of the MAFF. Other examples in fruit production include setting farmed area targets for different crops (i.e. what crop production should be reduced-increased), promoting new farming techniques,[144] cultivars, and providing guidelines for the development of the processing industry (MAFF 2015b:24).[145] Nagano prefecture sets specific targets for farmed areas and different varieties, promoting original breeds.[146] It also promotes the establishment of new, larger cold storage facilities to supply produce in periods when prices are higher (Nagano ken 2016:17). These are realms typically left to the market in most capitalist economies. However, Japanese farmers are so used to being guided by a central policy that this is just business as usual.

[144] For instance, dwarf trees cultivation (*shin-waika*) can improve efficiency in apple farming. While for a 10are 'normal' apple orchard produces on average 3000kg and require 211 working hours, a shin-waika orchard of the same size produces 3600kg and only requires 175 hours (Nagano ken 2016:3).

[145] For instance, the Fruit Farm Management Support Program provides subsidies to farmers who transplant better fruit cultivars, improve farm infrastructure, hire labour, etc. (USDA 2010:7)

[146] Nagano's original apple varieties include *Shinano suīto, Shinano gōrudo, Shinano doruce*, and the recently introduced *Shinano rippu*. The prefectural fruit agriculture promotion plan for the period 2014-2024 aim to reduce Fuji and Tsugaru varieties, which still represents 57% and 19% of the total apple orchard area and to expand the cultivation of original varieties. *Shinano rippu* in particular is an early-harvest breed that should replace Tsugaru (another early-harvest breed). Nagano's original grape variety is Nagano pāpuru, a breed characterised by big grapes, dark colour, absence of seeds, and thin (edible) skin. These days these are all features appealing Japanese consumers. Nagano prefecture promotes *Nagano pāpuru* cultivation together with the now nationwide popular *Shain masukatto*. These two varieties should replace the traditional *Kyohō* grape, which currently represents about 60% of all grape grown in Nagano (Nagano ken 2016).

While in the years of Japan's rapid economic development, state intervention was deemed necessary to prevent the widening of the wealth gap between rural and urban citizens, today the emergency is represented by the depopulating countryside and the declining agricultural industry. Fruit production in Japan has been declining since the late 1970s.[147] Total fruit farmed area and produced volume fell by over half between 1980 and 2015 (from 420,000ha to 220,000; from 6.2 million tons to 2.8 million tons) (MAFF 2019b:5).[148] The number of 'commercial' farming households (*hanbai nōka*) (i.e. non-self-sustenance farmers)[149] shrunk from 280.000 to 210.000 between 2005 and 2015, down 25% in just ten years. Farmers above 60 years of age accounted for 77% of all commercial fruit farming households in 2015. More than other crops, fruit farming is characterised by an ageing farming population and a problem of lack of successors. The Japanese Government and the MAFF have long been encouraging fruit export in order to support domestic fruit production, but, despite an improving trend in recent years, results are still far from significant.[150] Even if exports slowly continue to rise, total fruit production will likely continue to decline. The progressive lowering of trade protection will only accelerate this trend. Fruit will not be the first product or industry that meets this fate. Other quality products rooted in traditional craftsmanship have flourished during Japan's post-war development, to be later blasted by international competition. They have not disappeared entirely but survive as high-end niche

[147] Fruit production value in 2015 stood at 8.33 trillion yen, representing 9% of all agricultural production value (MAFF 2019d). This value and share are higher if taking into account fruits that are not included in the MAFF list, such as strawberry, melon, and watermelon (the MAFF defines 'fruit' as fruits produced from perennial trees and plants). In terms of cultivated area, tangerine (44,600ha), apple (38,600ha), persimmon (21,400ha), chestnuts (20,300ha), and grape (18,100ha) are the five most widely cultivated fruit. In terms of value, the top ten fruit are tangerine (176 billion yen), strawberry (174 billion yen), apple (148 billion yen), grape (122 billion yen), pear (79 billion yen), melon (67 billion yen), watermelon (59 billion yen), peach (57 billion yen), persimmon (46 billion yen), and cherry (42 billion yen). Top fruits in terms of volume are apple (811,500), tangerine (777,800t), pear (247,300t), persimmon (242,000t), and grape (180,500t).

[148] While the cultivated area has shrunk for most fruit, some have dropped more steadily than others. Tangerine (mikan) production for instance, from its peak of 6.7million tons in 1979 has shrunk to 3 million tons in 2015.

[149] *Hanbai nōka* also include part-time farmers. In fruit, in 2015 they represented about 30% of all *hanbai nōka* (MAFF 2019d). Since 1995, Japan's Agricultural Census has employed another way to categorise farm households: business (*shugyō nōka*), semi-business (*jun-shugyō nōka*), and side-business (*fukugyō nōka*), where farming households are categorised according to the share of farm income as a proportion of total household income (business = more than half; semi and side-business = less than half). In addition, it also considers the extent to which household members engage directly in farming operations (business and semi-business = at least one member 65 years old or younger engages in farming for more than 60 days in a year; side- business = no such member).

[150] The value of fresh fruit exports (top 6 items) stood at 17.3billion yen in 2017 (MAFF 2019d:23). Major exported fruit are apple (76.8%), Japanese pear (5.0%), peach (4.6%) and mandarin (3.9%). Taiwan is the largest buyer and absorbs roughly 60% of Japan's exports, followed by Hong Kong with about 30%.

markets. Expensive fruit parlours will remain, but perfect Japanese fruit will probably disappear from supermarkets' shelves and a large part of Japan's countryside will be replaced by imported produce. Fruit consumption in Japan might change as a result. Lowering prices, perhaps at the expense of lowering aesthetic quality, might influence consumption habits and change the perception of fruit as an expensive delicacy.

Training routes

Growing fruit in Japan requires high skills. Vegetables might be easier to grow, but even in this case, farming know-how is paramount, so proper training is a precondition for the success of new entrants. According to most people I met in organisations promoting new entry in agriculture, lack of farming skills is the primary reason why many new entrants fail to secure sufficient income from agriculture. Agriculture is heavily conditioned by the weather, so experience is key. Because every year on the fields is different from the previous one, it is difficult to deal effectively with exceptional situations after just one or two years of training. Spraying is, for instance, a delicate task requiring perfect timing based on weather variation. According to the head of Nagano prefectural office for the promotion of agriculture, new farmers fully realise the importance of experience only after they complete their training and establish a farm. 'While training, they receive constant guidance, but suddenly they have to make decisions on their own and start making mistakes.' Unsurprisingly, many new entrants continue to rely for years on their mentors for help and advice when possible. Not only are new farmers unlikely to cope well with new situations, but they are typically slow and inefficient. Achieving accuracy and efficiency in a multitude of tasks is not easy. Through repetition, small mistakes and unneeded movements are internalised and become habits. Mistakes are sometimes the consequence of lack of training but sometimes arise unconsciously, by gradually deviating from what was originally learned. Excessive confidence can lead to major losses. Some people expand the farmed area too quickly and end up being unable to look after the crop properly. Pests or diseases begin spreading, and they fail to notice it in time.

‘Everyone can grow some veggies, but only experienced farmers know how to grow high-quality products in large quantity. If your produce is not perfect, it will not be paid much.’[151]

Expertise in farming is sometimes under-appreciated. According to Yoda san, an organic farmer from Tokyo now living in Karuizawa, organic farmers are often not sufficiently trained in horticulture. ‘Many improvised farmers use too much fertiliser or Bordeaux mixture. What they grow might be called ‘organic, but it’s more unhealthy and environmentally harmful than conventional agriculture.’ Yoda san argued that inconsistency in farming skills is what prevents the formation of quality standards in organic agriculture and that this is a major reason why production groups of organic growers are uncommon, distribution outlets remain limited, and the organic food market in Japan is still undeveloped. Standardising production is a major concern for agricultural cooperatives too, so they encourage members to abide by certain guidelines. Wholesalers, distributors, and retailers highly prize production areas capable of delivering bulk products at a constant, standardised quality. Diffusing standardised farming practices is, therefore, an important function fulfilled by JA.[152]

Training programmes for aspiring farmers from a non-farming background are not new in Japan. As discussed in Chapter 2, already in the late 1980s, some agricultural cooperatives and producers’ groups in depopulating municipalities started to establish training schemes to attract new settlers from the city. Since the early 2010s, however, their number has surged due to growing interest in agriculture among urban youth and the introduction of new subsidies to promote participation in the industry. There are two ways in which aspiring self-employed farmers can acquire farming skills: 1) seek temporary employment in farms, agricultural corporations, or agricultural cooperatives, and 2) train as ‘trainees’ (*kenshū-sei*) in a farm or in a dedicated facility (e.g. agricultural schools) while receiving subsidies. Training full-time as a trainee became possible nationwide thanks to the introduction of a financial support scheme for new entry farmers in 2012

[151] Interview with JA Ueda Farm’s director
[152] Maintaining a team of agronomists is a significant cost for agricultural cooperatives.

(*nōgyō jisedai jinzai tōshi jigyō*).[153] Under the scheme, trainees receive a yearly allowance of 1.5 million yen (roughly £12,000) for up to two years of training. Aspiring trainees can approach individual farmers directly or rely on certified farmers registries filed by prefectures and municipalities. To be eligible, applicants must be under 45 years of age (50 since 2019) and training must be carried out for at least one year in a 'suitable' facility for a minimum of 1,200 hours/year (MAFF 2019c). Recipients must find employment in agriculture within one year from the end of training and must become 'certified new farmers' within five years, or the total sum must be returned (details in Chapter 6). Because of these requirements, some aspiring farmers opt instead for informal, more flexible training arrangements (e.g. only weekends).[154] Seeking temporary employment in farms, agricultural corporations, or agricultural cooperatives is another common route for new entrants to acquire farming know-how. It is also the only viable option for aspiring farmers above 45 years of age (50 since 2019) as they are not eligible for training grants under the national support scheme. Being an employee rather than a trainee presents various advantages, typically including a (slightly) higher salary. Salaries paid to new employees became more competitive thanks to national subsidies introduced in 2009 for farms hiring new employees without experience (*nō no koyō-yō jigyō*).[155] Subsidies made salaries more appealing for new entrants, while at the same time making hiring inexperienced workers more appealing for farmers. The measure thus addressed two issues at once: promoting new entry and helping farmers to secure their workforce. Employment might also be preferable to a training programme because, in the latter case, the total amount received by trainees in the form of grants must be returned if one quits before completion of the programme. On the other hand, unlike farm employees, trainees are often entitled to special municipal/prefectural support. For instance, trainees under Nagano prefecture's training

[153] The scheme has two tiers, one providing a stipend for two years of training (*junbi-kei*), and one providing income-supplementing subsidies for the first five years of farm management (*keiei kaishi-kei*). Details in Chapter 6.
[154] Lack of suitable training precludes the possibility to access income-supplementing grants under the second tier of the national financial support scheme (*keiei kaishi-kei*). To be eligible, among other things, applicants must in fact demonstrate to have sufficient farming skills (i.e. to have undertaken sufficient and suitable training). Regardless, aspiring small-scale/part-time farmers are basically ineligible for these subsidies since another condition is, in fact, to present a business plan indicating that the farm will secure a minimum annual income of 2.5million yen in five years (details in chapter 6).
[155] 120,000yen/year for up to two years paid to the host farmer.

scheme can apply for discounted accommodation. Different training options have inherent pros and cons, but inevitably much depends on the specific features of different institutions. Similar to artisanal apprenticeship discussed by Singleton et al. (1998), trainees are introduced into communities of practice, allowing them to learn by socialization, visualization, and imitation. Situated learning influences the way newcomers assimilate knowledge, norms, and values. Eastern Nagano provides examples of different training routes: an institutionalised prefectural training scheme under individual farmers (*sato-oya*), an agricultural school, and a training program established by an agricultural cooperative, on which I will focus.

The *sato-oya* training scheme (*sato-oya kenshū seido*) was established in Nagano prefecture in 2003 and is said to have provided the model for the national financial support scheme for new entrants. Between 2003 and 2016, 581 people enrolled in the programme. Individuals in their 20s and 30s represented 26% and 48% of all applicants, respectively. About half of them came from the Tokyo metropolitan area. In 2018, eight people were training under the system in Ueda district (four individuals and two couples). Although trainees' allowance now comes from national subsidies,[156] the *sato-oya* programme is not just a prefectural list of certified farmers agreeing to train aspiring new entrants. As the name of the programme suggests, mentor farmers (*sato-oya*)[157] are broadly responsible for trainees. Together with transferring farming skills, they help trainees in securing farmland, equipment, machinery, and housing. They are also expected to continue supporting new entrants after they become independent, for instance, by providing technical counselling. This is one of the strengths of training under a farmer in the programme, as compared to seeking temporary employment in a farm. For mentor farmers, it is not easy to fulfil such a demanding role.[158] Hayashi san is the heir of a farming family in Ueda since the Edo period. He has been growing apple and grape for over 50 years and became a *sato-oya* in 2014. Akira, a 29 year old man from Tokyo, had

[156] Before 2012, trainees were financed by the prefecture and the municipalities.
[157] In Japanese, *sato-oya* refers to foster parents adopting children typically from orphanages.
[158] Indeed *sato-oya* farmers do not do this for free. For their services, they are payed 14,000yen/month by trainees and 29,000yen/month by the prefecture.

just begun to train at Hayashi san's farm when I started fieldwork. Thanks to Hayashi san, Akira had already secured an abandoned field of 4are to rent where he will establish a new grape orchard from scratch as well as a 1.5are apple orchard that is already productive. He was very grateful as he knew he had been lucky to secure such good fields in that part of Ueda city. Hayashi san receives many requests from neighbour farmers without successors looking for someone to whom they can entrust their fields, but plots tend to be small or of low quality (old tree varieties, damaged trellis, many rocks, etc.). For *sato-oya,* it is not always possible to fulfil their role. The amount of land, houses, and used machinery they can access through their personal network, and then pass on to trainees, progressively decreases as they take in new trainees. Farmhouses, in particular, are hard to come by and Akira was struggling to find one to live in with his wife, who still worked in Tokyo and did not want to live in the countryside in a small apartment.

The greatest problem for trainees under individual farmers is said to be interpersonal relationships. According to the head of Nagano prefecture agricultural promotion centre, this is the major reason why trainees quit. 'It's understandable. You suddenly find yourself with this person all day, taking orders, doing things you've never done before in a new environment, without family or friends to cheer you up. It can be very tough.' Out of the 581 people who enrolled in the programme between 2002 and 2016, 367 successfully started a new farm, while about 30% quit during training, often because of this reason.[159] *Sato-oya* trainees I met in eastern Nagano were overall satisfied with their relationship with their mentors. Some were training as couples, and this possibly contributed to easing 'transition stress.' Some of them, on the other hand, complained about the lack of autonomy at the farm. It is common among *sato-oya* to entrust trainees with a small field that they can manage autonomously in the second year of training. Sometimes trainees are even encouraged to sell their crop independently. For some of them, this did not happen, and they were quite disappointed.

[159] Other common reasons are health issues and family issues. Some people quit in Nagano but continue farming elsewhere.

Komoro agricultural school (*Komoro nōgyō dai-gakkō*) offers a nine-month programme for aspiring farmers (as well as short-term and weekend courses for individuals with a general interest in farming), and trainees are eligible for training grants under the national support scheme. The facility is part of the Nagano prefecture agricultural school nexus and was originally established as a research facility (research activity is still carried out). The school has five instructors providing theoretical and practical training in different crops, farm management, and use of machinery. Trainees live in the school dormitory from April to December, then spend three months in a farm where they will undertake another year of training under the *sato-oya* scheme. The course is designed for aspiring farmers without a clear idea of what to grow. In nine months, trainees grow various crops and decide what to specialise in. Between 2011 and 2018, the school took in ten trainees per year on average. About 60% came from outside the prefecture, mostly from the Tokyo metropolitan area, 30% were U-turners, and 10% local residents. Almost all trainees were in their 30s and 40s and from a non-farming family.[160] Compared to training undertaken under individual farmers, the programme allows trainees to interact with many instructors and other people of similar age/background. As previously mentioned, some people training under individual farmers experience loneliness and conflictual relationships with their mentors. Agricultural schools, on the other hand, allow trainees to work along with their peers and establish new friendships. For many, this contributes to a smoother transition in the new environment. The presence of many instructors also allows aspiring farmers to get different perspectives on various aspects of farm management, such as marketing. For instance, an instructor I interviewed praised JA as the most reliable market outlet, was critical of direct sales through parcel delivery, and had a very negative opinion of organic farming. Another potential strength of agricultural schools is the fact that instructors might be better teachers than farmers. This was, for instance, the opinion of Tetsuya, a trainee at JA Ueda Farm: 'Oftentimes farmers are not good teachers. Many of them have never taught anyone, some of them are quite grumpy and usually don't deal well with shy novices reluctant to ask things twice.'

[160] Couples represent about 10%. Many people were from an IT or sales background.

Sato-oya trainees.

JA Ueda Farm

Shinshū Ueda Fāmu (hereinafter JA Ueda Farm) is the organisation where I conducted participant observation in Nagano prefecture. JA Ueda Farm is an example of JA-participating agricultural corporation (*JA shusshi-kei nōgyō hōjin*), a legal entity introduced through a revision of the Land Act in 1993 allowing agricultural cooperatives to invest in agricultural corporations in areas severely afflicted by a shrinking farming population (Lee 2014, 2016; Lee and Taniguchi 2015; Hidetoshi 2016; NRI 2015). Throughout the second half of the 20th-century, cooperatives progressively expanded the range of agricultural services provided to members (e.g. seedling growing, harvest processing, sorting, etc.), but never engaged in farm management directly. Since the 1980s, however, many old members no longer able to farm had been asking for greater involvement of JA in farming operations (Lee 2014). The goal of the reform was to allow cooperatives to support Japan's declining regional agriculture more effectively through an economically viable business model. Initially centred on providing services to rice farmers, JA

agricultural corporations gradually embarked on direct farm management.[161] Since the late 2000s, these entities also took on new roles such as the recovery of abandoned farmland, the training of new agricultural entrants, and the promotion of new synergies between production, processing, and distribution (in Japanese known as *rokujisangyō*).[162]

JA agricultural corporations can be divided into two types: JA-led corporations (*JA shudō-kei nōgyō hōjin*) in which cooperatives provide to more than half of the investment capital, and JA-participating corporations in which cooperatives contribute to less than half of the investment capital. The latter group includes incorporated hamlet-based collective farms (*shūraku einō*)[163] discussed in Chapter 2 and agricultural corporations established by local governments.[164] The number of JA agricultural corporation has grown steadily, reaching 646 units nationwide in 2017 (213 JA-led corporations, 272 collective farms, and 159 corporations established by local governments) (Zen-chū 2018a:10). JA agricultural corporations are typically large in scale: most of them manage between 10 and 30ha (33.5%), 30-50ha (17.6%), and 50-100ha (13.5%). Remarkably, 12.8% run over 100ha (Zen-chū 2018a:12).[165] The majority of them engage in rice agriculture (69.4%), open field vegetables (35.3%), and greenhouse vegetables (18.4%).[166] Most JA agricultural corporations initially run deficits because fields and facilities or machinery are usually in bad condition, but tend to become profitable after a few years as they enlarge size.[167] The number of JA corporations offering training for new entrants has kept growing since the late 2000s, from 10

[161] Agricultural corporation rent farmland and formally become the cultivator.
[162] E.g. the development of food processing to increase the share of value-added products and promotion of the establishment of direct sale stores (*chokubaijo*). JA group white-papers also emphasise the role of JA agricultural corporations in providing a model for local agriculture through the introduction of new crops, varieties, and farming methods, as well as a reduction in the use of pesticides/chemical fertilisers (Zen-chū 2018b:8).
[163] Many JA have invested in collective farms to support their incorporation. Some JAs like JA Gurīn ōmi in Shiga prefecture have invested in more than 30 collective farms as of 2016 (Lee 2016). In 2017 there were 15,136 collective farms, of which 5,106 were incorporated (they acquired the status of agricultural corporations) (MAFF 2018a).
[164] Since 2003 local governments too were allowed to invest in an agricultural corporation, and sometimes partner with JA, to address problems such as farm abandonment.
[165] These figures are based on a sample of 402 agricultural corporations and do not distinguish between JA-led corporations, JA-participated collective farms, and JA-participated corporations established by local governments. Collective farms are likely to be larger in size and mostly centred on rice agriculture.
[166] Only a minority engage, for instance, in fruit farming (10.0%), stockbreeding (4.5%), or dairy (3.5%).
[167] In 2000, out of 36 JA agricultural corporations, 16 were running a deficit (44%), but in 2012, out of 130, only 25 operated in red (19%) (Zen-chū 2018a:16). For corporations centred on rice agriculture in particular, profitability is typically achieved when total farmland reaches 30-40ha.

in 2008 to 91 in 2017.[168] They often help graduated trainees to secure farmland and used machinery upon entry (Zen-chū 2018a:18). Given their relatively small number and short history, however, JA agricultural corporations still play a minor role in the training of new entrants when compared to other routes.[169]

Following a successive revision of the Land Act in 2009 aimed at allowing general companies to engage in farming through the leasing of farmland, agricultural cooperatives too became allowed to directly engage in farm management without the need to establish an agricultural corporation. On the other hand, relatively few cooperatives took advantage of this opportunity, and in 2017 only 59 were engaging in direct management (Zen-chū 2018a:10). According to the director of JA Ueda Farm, the reason is that farm management often is not profitable, and this negatively affects cooperatives' financial statements. Most agricultural cooperatives in Japan run a deficit in their agricultural divisions (a deficit sustained by the more profitable finance and insurance businesses). This is a sensitive issue and source of criticism for JA, so cooperatives prefer not to further worsen the financial balance of their agricultural divisions.[170] On the contrary, when creating a corporation, agricultural cooperatives can more easily access subsidies and justify the low profitability of the subsidiary company by emphasising its role as a community service provider.

Nagano prefecture currently counts 16 agricultural cooperatives and 18 JA-led agricultural corporations.[171] Out of them, nine offer a training programme for aspiring farmers. JA Ueda Farm was established by JA Ueda in 2000,[172] originally in order to provide services to rice farmers (e.g. planting, harvest) like many other JA-led corporations. Farm management was initially centred on

[168] The current number is likely higher since the survey was conducted on a sample of 402 units, while the total number of JA agricultural corporations was 646 in 2017. Based on this sample, 22.6% engaged in the training of new agricultural entrants (Zen-chū 2018a:10).
[169] 64 corporations surveyed in 2017 took in 628 trainees so far, of which 324 started their own farm (Zen-chū 2018a:18). Each year about 2500 recipients of the national support scheme undertake training in farms and agricultural schools (MAFF 2019b). On the other hand, agricultural cooperatives need not to establish agricultural corporations to create training programs and other forms of support of new entrants. In this perspective, the contribution of JA to new entry is certainly greater. Zen-nō conducted a survey in 2015 on 220 cooperatives: 37% responded that they have a comprehensive support system, 31% engage in some form of support, and 31% is not. 86 cooperatives have a training program in place.
[170] The Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives (Zen-chū) makes it explicit that JA direct management must be based on an economically viable business model and that financial statements must be clear (Zen-chū 2018b:4).
[171] Two cooperatives have not established/participated in corporations, while some have more than one (e.g. a combination of collective farms and a JA-led corporations).
[172] JA Ueda contributed to most of the total investment capital (36million yen). Two farmers put the symbolic amount of 50,000 yen.

open field asparagus and tomatoes for juice production. However, profits were overall disappointing, so greenhouse vegetables (mostly red peppers) and strawberries were introduced in the mid-2000s, replacing tomatoes. The area under management snowballed and in 2018 reached 73.9ha.[173] Together with fields from old farmers without successors, JA Ueda Farm also began to retrieve fallow fields under the prefectural plan for the regeneration of abandoned farmland (*kōsaku-hōki-chi saisei-riyō jigyō*). However, as land under management increased, so did Ueda Farm deficit. Not only does it take time and money to bring abandoned fields back into production, but fields entrusted to JA by older farmers too, typically require significant investments. This is indeed the greatest problem for most JA agricultural corporations (Zen-chū 2018a:14). Fields are also scattered over a vast area, further lowering efficiency. JA Ueda Farm also has a problem of labour shortage and could hardly keep up with such rapid expansion.[174] Cooperatives cannot reject requests from old members. 'We end up taking every field. Sometimes they are leased for free, but often we have to pay rent, albeit small' the director told me. In principle, landowners should contribute to maintenance expenses (cleaning of ditches, mowing, etc.), but this rarely happens.[175]

JA Ueda Farm produced better results since 2009 when the recovery of farmlands was complemented by the introduction of a training programme for new agricultural entrants. The system works as follows. JA Farm hires aspiring farmers as employees for two years. During this period, they choose several fields recently acquired by JA and carry out improvement measures. After the end of the training, they lease the fields (JA ends the lease contract) and start their own farm. This is an effective model, especially for fruit farming. Many new entrants are interested in fruit farming but find it difficult to access productive orchards. To establish a new orchard on an empty field and wait several years from planting to the first harvest is not a viable option for most

[173] In 2018 14ha rice, 24ha wheat, 6ha soy, 8ha soba, 9ha open field veggies (6ha of broccoli), 1.7ha greenhouse vegetables (mostly strawberries and asparagus), 10ha fruit orchard (mostly apples (6.6ha) and grape (3ha)). Fields are spread over Tōmi city and Ueda city.
[174] Together with low-quality farmland, labour shortage and the ageing of employees are among the greatest problems for JA agricultural corporations (Zen-chū 2018a:14).
[175] This is a widespread problem: according to statistics, only 8.2% of JA agricultural corporations collect taxes contributing to field management expenses from landowners (Zen-chū 2018a:16).

aspiring farmers.[176] Old orchards are often in bad conditions when JA Farm acquires them (tree varieties, fences, trellis, presence of rocks, etc.), but in two years they are brought to decent condition and production levels. This model is based on a prefectural plan introduced in 2009 (*nōchi riyō shūseki enkatsuka dantai jigyō*) whereby farmland is leased on a ten-year contract base by a certified body that then transfers it on to new agricultural entrants.[177] Between 2012 and 2018, JA Ueda Farm acquired orchards for a total of 18.4ha, conducted improvement measures on 7.7ha, and passed 8.8ha on to graduated trainees. The synergy between the training programme and farmland availability is what makes JA Ueda Farm a more sustainable model.

An abandoned grape orchard recently acquired by JA Ueda Farm.

The sustainability of JA-led agricultural corporations largely depends on their ability to attract trainees. Not only do trainees provide an affordable workforce in areas characterised by a labour shortage, but new entrants also help JA agricultural corporations prevent cultivated area under management from rising too quickly. Attracting trainees can be very difficult for corporations located in disadvantaged areas, for instance, regions characterised by snowy and long winters,

[176] Purchasing and setting up trellis for a table-grape orchard can cost about 15million yen/ha. For an intensive apple orchard about10million yen/ha. Trees, fences, tree supports, etc., also represent significant investments. It takes about four years for trees to start producing and usually about eight years to reach full production.
[177] Some financial incentives on the purchase of materials are provided.

where, due to limited period of farming operations, hiring employees all year long is often unfeasible. As for other farms, paying a 'decent' salary to trainees-employees is only possible thanks to subsidies. Not only are trainees inefficient, but improvement operations carried out in fruit orchards never 'bear fruit' for JA Ueda Farm, which pass them on to new entrants as soon as they become more productive and profitable. At JA Ueda Farm trainees-employees are paid a monthly salary of 130,000 yen. There are different subsidy sources for JA agricultural corporations like JA Ueda Farm, including previously mentioned national subsidies,[178] funds set up by JA Nagano,[179] and by JA Bank.[180] A large amount of farmland made available by agricultural cooperatives is at the same time what makes JA training programmes appealing for aspiring farmers. Only JA with its network and reputation can provide such options in terms of farmland. Not only are trainees presented with a relatively high number of fields to choose from, but JA, acting as the middleman, ameliorates problems of trust between new entrants and landlords. Kobayashi san, a trainee from Ina city in Nagano, explicitly chose JA Ueda Farm training programme because in his opinion it gave better access to farmland than most other routes. He thought that securing farmland (and not farming skills) was the greatest problem for agricultural new entrants.

Despite representing a relatively successful case, JA Ueda Farm still runs a yearly (albeit small) deficit. According to the director, the way forward is to expand cultivations that are profitable from the first year, such as leaf vegetables, and improve subsidy hunting. From 2019, Ueda Farm stopped offering vineyards to trainees. This was one of the strengths of JA Ueda Farm, and the decision will likely affect the yearly intake of trainees. On the other hand, for JA Ueda Farm establishing new vineyards and passing them on to trainees is just too expensive. Unlike old fruit orchards, which at least are somehow productive during the first two years, vineyards must be established from scratch on abandoned fields (or reclaimed farmland as in the case of Midō project

[178] S*hinki koyō shien*: 97,000 yen per person per month. Only a few trainees actually got it, as some applications were rejected. There is lots of bureaucracy involved and it became increasingly difficult to get them. In 2018, only three trainees got it.
[179] *Nagano-ken shinki shūnō sōgō shien kikin* (new entrants comprehensive fund): 300,000 yen/person per year (two years) This pocket was set up by Nagano prefecture (budget 12.3million yen in 2018) to help agricultural cooperatives, NPOs, and municipalities running training programs.
[180] *JA Banku Aguro-Eco Sapōto kikin*: 10,000-30,000yen per person per month for two years.

discussed in Chapter 1). Fields have to be cleared from weeds, soil improvement measures have to be carried out, grape vines planted, poles and cables installed, etc. For JA Ueda Farm it is a net loss. In general, it is uneconomical to retrieve abandoned fields because they are in appalling condition, so from now on Ueda Farm will only take in fields about to be abandoned or just recently abandoned. The director was also trying to implement a model similar to that of Kamiina JA, whereby half of the trainees' salaries are paid by the city-town-village where they will start their farm after completion of training.[181] Negotiations were underway, but the proposal had yet to find support from Ueda city government.

Between 2009 and February 2019, 46 people joined JA Ueda Farm training programme: thirteen were currently training, twenty-eight had graduated and become independent farmers, and five quit during training. Most trainees were in their 30s (23), followed by individuals in their 20s (10), 40s (8), 50s (4), and 60s (1). Twenty-two came from the Tokyo metropolitan area, twenty from within the district (Tōmi and Ueda city), two from other municipalities in Nagano prefecture, and two from different prefectures (Iwate and Hokkaido). The cohort training between April 2018 and March 2019 was composed of four second-year trainees and nine first-year trainees. Seven of them came from Tokyo area, four from Tōmi/Ueda city, one from another town in Nagano, and one from Iwate prefecture.[182]

[181] Kamiina JA runs a training program for aspiring farmers since 1996 and is said to be a pioneer in implementing a training program for new agricultural entrants. Trainees work as JA employees under a local farmer or at JA Saien, a subsidiary company established by JA Kamiina in 2008 (the equivalent of JA Ueda Farm). Half of trainees' salary is paid by the cooperative and the other half from one of the eight cities/towns/villages in Kamiina district depending on where trainees settle. Between 1996 and 2018, JA Kamiina took in 85 trainees, of which 55 from outside the district (five from within Nagano prefecture), all from a non-farming background. Most of them were between 18 and 45 years old. The program lasts for one year in principle but can be extended to up to three years. Applicants must agree to start a new farm in the municipality and manage it for least 10 years. Out of 85 trainees no one quit during the program, while 14 ultimately didn't enter agriculture or quit later on. According to JA Saien director, some of the new entrants are gradually enlarging farm size, while others prefer to keep the business small and complement farming income with seasonal work. Some of them took on important roles: a new farmer from Tokyo became JA board member and another from Osaka became the leader of the local apple production group.

[182] Four of them, all from Tokyo area, focused on wine. Five on table grape farming (a couple from Chiba, one from Nagano, and two from Tōmi/Ueda). Two on vegetable (one from Tōmi specialising on greenhouse production and one from Iwate on open field). One on greenhouse strawberries from Tōmi.

The 2018 trainee team at JA Ueda Farm. Picture taken during a shooting for the nōgyō shibnun.

The selection of candidates is based on CV screening and three to four interview sessions with the Ueda Farm director and the responsible person at Ueda city agriculture promotion centre. Like other training programmes, Ueda Farm looks for motivated, resolute candidates. Candidates must agree to start their own farm in the district as 'certified new farmers' (see chapter 6) after completing the programme. In their second year, trainees are typically entrusted with the fields that they will lease upon entry. Trainees are assessed based on their performance, and graduation is conditional on JA Ueda farm director's approval. JA Ueda Farm programme has a relatively good track record so far. Out of 46 people who enrolled between 2009 and 2019, only five quit.[183] One trainee in the 2018-2019 cohort was also going to quit. He could not get a good vineyard lot at Midō (Tōmi's new large vineyard discussed in Chapter 1) and decided to move back to Saitama (Tokyo suburb) and establish there a small vineyard-winery. The twenty-eight trainees who had

[183] Two female trainees quit for personal reasons; one because the husband wanted her to, and one because of troubles with another trainee (now she started her own tomato farm). One trainee wanted to grow strawberries but realised he did not have enough money and decided to find employment elsewhere instead. One young trainee was 'lazy' and 'unsuitable for agriculture' according to Ueda Farm director (he often overslept, did not take precautions before typhoons, etc.) and went to work in another agricultural corporation. Another trainee quit because he was not happy with the JA programme and joined the *sato-oya* system instead (according to the director he also wasn't fit for agriculture).

graduated from the programme were run their own farms mostly in Tōmi and Ueda (twelve grow greenhouse vegetables/strawberries, seven wine, nine fruit). I met four of them, and they were all satisfied with their lifestyle and with the farm. They gradually expanded operations and were confident about the financial sustainability of their activity, as further discussed in Chapter 7.

Following Japan's employment cycle, trainees start working at the beginning of April. They typically work eight hours a day, five days a week. On busy periods they might have to work extra hours or during weekends. The typical working day is from 8am to 5pm with a one-hour lunch break, but during the summer, depending on trainees' crop specialisation and duties, most trainees started at 6am. The day began with a morning meeting at the office.[184] Tōmi office, which also functioned as a dining space for lunch, was located inside one of Ueda JA units, next to a shop for farming implements and a sorting-shipping centre for fruit and vegetable. The parking lot was usually crowded when local farmers brought their produce for collection in the morning. Between late September and mid-November, a coin-operated washing machine for walnuts was placed near the entrance to the office and used every day by local growers. The office was a large, long room filled with desks and shelves. The walls were covered with maps, charts, posters, and whiteboards. Most of the room was occupied by JA employees (accountants and technical personnel), while the space used by JA Ueda Farm team and the trainees consisted of a long table and a low shelf filled with ring binders. The long table was used by trainees in the morning while waiting to be dispatched to different fields, and, on occasions, during lunch breaks. The director and two other employees used to sit at the bottom of the long table, surrounded by fax machines, telephones, and laptops. By the wall a microwave, an electric kettle, and boxes with fresh produce to snack on.

Morning meetings started with a brief speech of Funada san, the director, on topics such as local news, problems with the crops, prefectural initiatives, etc. Koizumi san and Kobayashi san, the employees in charge of fruit and vegetables respectively, divided trainees into groups of two or

[184] JA Farms has two headquarters, one in Ueda city mostly centred on strawberries and asparagus, and one in Tōmi city, mostly centred on fruit and open filed vegetables. I was based in Tōmi city, as were most trainees.

more and sent us to different fields depending on the task of the day. We transferred using a van provided by JA and trainees' K-trucks.[185] Work breaks at 10am and at 3pm allowed trainees to rest and chat. Lunch breaks took place at the office or in the fields. Each trainee kept a diary to record daily tasks. This had the double purpose of ensuring working hours at Ueda Farm are tracked, and a valuable record for trainees.

The size, shape, and position of the fields managed by JA Ueda farm varied remarkably. Most of them were located on the mountain side, some adjacent to major street, other hidden between groups of houses. Some were in an open space surrounded by other fields, while other were on steep hollows surrounded by forest. Because Tōmi rises on the mountainside of an active volcano, the area is rocky, and bigger rocks have long been used to build walls and ditches around houses. Vineyards tended to be small and crowded with rocks, which made growing anything else quite difficult. Since most of the fields acquired by JA were abandoned or in very poor condition, stakes and trellis were crooked and rusty. It was quite a task to plant new vines on a slope in irregular, rocky orchards covered in ragged trellis rising too low above the ground. Apple orchards were usually larger and in better condition. Intensive orchards using a high number of trees kept small along an espalier are still relatively uncommon, so most apple orchards hosted monumental trees of all sizes and shapes. Year after year the trees had been pruned to expand horizontally rather than vertically, so their branches were thick and twisted and often need to be sustained by poles. Old trees might not be so productive, but they are certainly fascinating.

JA Ueda Farm programme has strengths and weaknesses when compared to other training options. As in agricultural schools, trainees work in a group, creating a sense of community, and establishing new friendships. At the same time, aspiring fruit farmers at JA Ueda Farm are unlikely to achieve the level of specialisation and expertise of *sato-oya* trainees working under individual farmers. For the past few years, Ueda Farm had not had a real fruit expert among its staff. Koizumi

[185] Little trucks produced in Japan, and a must-have for every farmer, as small vehicles can navigate rural Japan's net of narrow streets. JA pays for the gasoline.

san, the person in charge of fruit orchards, only had limited working experience in fruit farming before he was hired three years earlier. To manage its orchards, JA Ueda Farm largely relies on part-time senior farmers, some more experienced than others, who, together with Koizumi san, were the actual trainees' instructors. Once or twice a month, they also participate in practical seminars for local farmers conducted by JA agronomists. For some people, the relative lack of specialised training was not a big problem. 'No matter what, I'll have to rely on local farmers for some years after starting my own farm. We have time to learn, I don't think we should worry too much.'[186] Many trainees appreciated the fact that the programme allowed them to learn from many different farmers and see different techniques and ways of doing things. For Kobayashi san this was one of the reasons why he chose JA Ueda Farm in the first place. 'Farmers are proud of their methods, they think it's the right way and expect you to do as they say, but at JA, people are more open and flexible.'

A lack of specialised personnel, and a lack of workforce in general, represents a major problem. JA Ueda Farm had an insufficient number of workers for its size (18 full-time employees and 13 trainees in 2018) and, as a consequence, trainees agreed that many operations were carried out roughly or too late. In his second year, Ota kun was entrusted with a large apple orchard (about 1ha) to manage by himself. This would have been enough as a full-time job, but he also had to work in other orchards. One day in late August I was assigned to help him, and since the last time I had been there the field had turned into a jungle: weeds had not been cut for over a month, insects proliferated, and trees carried far too many apples (i.e. selective thinning had not been done timely). Together with the constant sense of hurry, lack of planning was also pointed out as problematic. Fuki, for instance, complained about the impossibility of planning anything ahead. 'You think what you want to do during the week, but then Koizumi san comes and tells you there's other, more urgent work to do.' An insufficient workforce also means that trainees have to work independently. While inadequate supervision is certainly problematic, for trainees, this also meant a significant

[186] Interview with a trainee

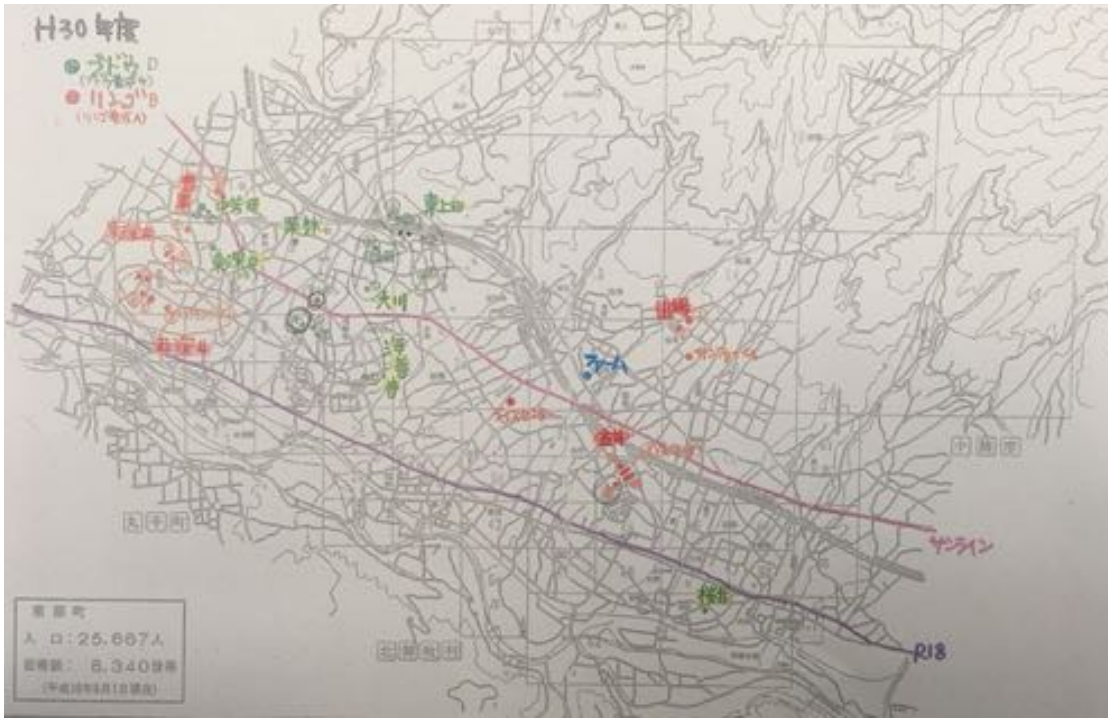
amount of freedom – freedom to 'experiment', make decisions, and make mistakes. In the previous winter, Oda kun, for instance, had to prune all apple trees by himself with little supervision. He was worried for the many mistakes he had undoubtedly made, but at the same time was very excited to see the outcome of his trials and experiments. This was something many trainees did not get to experience much before starting their own farm. Perhaps even the somewhat chaotic organisation of work at Ueda Farm had a positive side: it made trainees aware that in agriculture improvising is as important as planning and that you often have to make do. These are precious lessons for aspiring farmers.

JA trainees participating to practical seminars conducted by JA agronomists.

That being said, the inefficient use of resources was often the consequence of poor planning. Lack of organisation was, for instance, evident in logistics, with trainees sometimes sent from pillar to posts without a clear rationale. For instance, during the harvest of apples, groups of trainees would be sent to an orchard, even for just ten minutes.[187] For the standards to which I was accustomed, the establishment of new orchards was also carried out quite roughly: the ground was

[187] Fields managed by JA Ueda Farm are scattered across a vast area, and transferring from one to another took a significant amount of time.

not levelled, large stones were left on site, new trees were planted without removing old ones or before planting poles, etc. Once again, the problem is that JA Ueda Farm operates on a low budget and must make do with limited resources. For instance, removing old trees before planting new ones would be ideal, but because old trees continue to produce until new ones become productive, they are left on site instead. Some fields were in a disastrous state: unshaped trees, irregular rows, bacterial blight spreading (*flam byō*), mice building nests under the trees and eating the roots, etc. For Tetsuya, working standards at Ueda Farm were much more relaxed than at the farm where he used to work in Chiba. He thought this was because, unlike farmers, JA employees don't need to worry about making ends meet and their livelihood is not at stake ('*seikatsu o kakatte-inai'*).



A map of the fields managed by JA Ueda Farm in Tōmi-shi and Ueda-shi.

Conclusions

This chapter first documented farming techniques adopted in fruit agriculture and their link with the constraints driving the reproduction of Japan's agrarian structure. Agriculture emerged as a realm in which culture, knowledge, and power are deeply intertwined. The analysis of fruit supply showed that the reproduction of farming practices and consumption habits, naturalised as the

product of tradition and the expression of culture, is significantly driven by policy and producers. Anthropological literature explained food cultures with reference to class (Bourdieu 1979), ethnicity (Codesal 2010), gender (Counihan 1999; Naguib 2015), memory (Sutton 2001), nationalism (Caldwell 2002), and colonialism (Mintz 1986; Canales 2019). Similar to Bestor (2004), who shows the role of distribution intermediaries as 'gatekeepers' influencing the reproduction of Japanese culinary tastes, this chapter demonstrated that the collective action of producers is also a key determinant of what ultimately gets eaten.

Emphasis on quality and aesthetics in Japan's fresh food market informs production standards and complicates the acquisition of farming know-how, which becomes a significant barrier to entry in agriculture. The second part of the chapter discussed difficulties involved in acquiring and refining farming skills, and training routes available to aspiring farmers. Different communities of practice influence how new farmers experience their transition, as well as the assimilation of knowledge, norms, and values. The case of JA Ueda Farm, with its strengths and its weaknesses, testifies agricultural cooperatives' role in promoting generational renewal in agriculture while at the same time addressing the problem of land abandonment in rural regions.

Acquiring farming know-how emerged as one of the greatest challenges faced by new entry farmers. It takes many years to consolidate expertise, a process inevitably involving mistakes and losses. At the same time, Japanese new entry farmers have plenty of opportunities to learn and refine farming skills. That half of new entrants cannot secure sufficient income from their activity five years into farm management is unlikely to be prevalently due to lack of expertise, but rather due to problems with the business models adopted, and in particular with aspects related to farm size and routes to market, the focus of the next two chapters.

Chapter 6

Accessing capital: subsidies for small and big farms

To establish and run a farm, new agricultural entrants must secure sufficient investment and working capital. Despite numerous financial support schemes introduced in the past decade at the national and local level, new entry farmers indicate capital constraints as a major hurdle (NCA 2017:58). Why is this the case, and what are the strategies they employ to cope with the situation? This chapter focuses on the role of agricultural subsidies in the success of new entrants. State support has been increasingly tied to farm enlargement, but this poses a dilemma for many farmers from the city who are not willing to expand operations. Mismatches between agricultural policy and new entrants' aspirations offer insights into the long-standing debate on the future of family farms and the dynamics of agrarian transformation. Beginning from Lenin's view on processes of capitalist development by differentiation, many have argued that the peasantry will eventually disappear to be replaced by 'a new breed of rural entrepreneurs able to withstand global competition for land, capital, and labour' (Hebinick 2018:230). The differentiation of peasants into rural proletariat and capitalist farmers has, however, been challenged by many scholars avoiding a strictly political-economy approach. The case of new entry farmers in Japan, a country characterised by small farming units and the prominence of part-time farming, allows a reassessment of concepts such as de/re-peasantisation and the role of peasants/entrepreneurial modes of farming toward agricultural development and rural revitalisation.

Accessing capital

All over the world, farmland acquisition and start-up costs represent major barriers to entry in agriculture (European Commission 2016:15). Although in Japan the purchase of farmland by new entrants is uncommon, investments in equipment, machinery, and infrastructure constitute a significant economic commitment. Together with investment capital, sufficient liquidity is also

needed for the purchase of farming inputs and the lease of farmland, as well as living expenses associated with relocation. In the early years of operations, financial constraints represent a major hurdle for many new farmers and, in particular, for youth with little or no personal savings. 'Last year I paid taxes based on the previous year's income from my full-time job in the city. The farm wasn't profitable, and I only survived thanks to subsidies.'[188] Profits are typically low in the early years of farm management and unplanned expenses, or crop losses, can quickly and easily drain scarce liquidity. As discussed in Chapter 5, age is an important factor to consider when starting a farming business given the amount of physical work involved, but older new entrants are usually better off economically and can make up for their relative lack of physical fitness with capital availability. 'One of the first things I ask young aspiring farmers is how much they have in personal savings. New entrants can borrow money at zero interest rate, but in my experience, being able to rely on personal savings makes a big difference.'[189] Capital-intensive agriculture that is less dependent on weather/labour (e.g. benefitting from automation, controlled environments, or the creation of added value through processing) is precluded for the majority of young farmers. Young new entrants I met on fieldwork typically chose labour-intensive crops such as fruit and open-field vegetables, while aspiring winemakers were older or coming from a wealthy family. As Wilbur (2012:157) points out, there is no question that privileged socio-economic status can facilitate the accumulation of rural property, disengagement from the formal labour market, and utilisation of economic networks that support small-scale farming.[190] In Japan's case too, socio-economic status is undoubtedly a key variable influencing the success of new entrants.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, in order to alleviate the financial difficulties of new entrants, in 2012 the MAFF set up a comprehensive financial support scheme for so-called 'certified new farmers' (*nintei shinki shūnō-sha*). Eligible applicants must meet the following conditions: be under

[188] Interview with a new entry farmer in Tōmi city.
[189] Interview with the head of Nagano Prefecture agricultural promotion centre.
[190] Class and socio-economic status became a major focus of attention in studies on pro-rural migration since the 1990s, but, as Gibson-Graham (2008: 616) convincingly argued, to treat urban-rural migration as a case of middle-class phenomenon significantly understates its socio-economic complexity.

45 years of age (50 since 2019), have undertaken sufficient and suitable training, and submit a sound business plan suggesting that the new farm will generate an income of at least ¥2.5 million (roughly £19,000) within five years from its establishment (MAFF 2019c). Among other benefits, certified new farmers can access a yearly income-supplementing allowance of ¥1.5 million for the first five years of operations (*nōgyō jisedai jinzai tōshi jigyō*) and zero-interest-rate loans for up to ¥37 million (*seinen-tō shūnō shikin*).[191] This is a generous provision compared for instance to financial support for new entrants under the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), whereby certified new farmers can access business start-up aid for investment in physical assets,[192] but no income-supplementing allowance. Moreover, while under the CAP only new entrants operating in farms of a minimum economic size are eligible for financial support,[193] in Japan, even applicants starting from zero can access subsidies. Age limits also differs. While only applicants under 40 years of age are eligible for CAP provision, Japan's national scheme was open to applicants under 45 years old until 2019, when a revision increased age limit to 50.

Despite their differences, what financial support schemes for new entrants in both Japan and Europe have in common is that their explicit policy goal, the promotion of generational renewal in agriculture, underlies farm enlargement as its corollary. Unsurprisingly, only commercial farms of a minimum size are eligible for subsidies. While ¥2.5 million income by the fifth year of farm

[191] Loans are granted by Japan Finance Corporation (*nihon seisaku kinyū kōko*), a policy based financial institution owned by the Japanese government whose co-function is the provision of business loans to SMEs and business start-ups. Total budget was ¥13.5 billion in 2019. From 2019, the loan repayment period was extended from 12 to 17 years. The total, the EU budget allocated specifically for the support to young farmers over the 2007-2020 period was 9.6 billion euro (ECA 2017:14). In Japan, in 2017, the budget was 20 billion yen (Nagano ken 2018).

[192] Grants' value varies depending on the country. In Italy, up to €30,000 and up to €50.000 in 'disadvantaged' regions.

[193] Requirements vary depending on how single countries and then regions adopt EU directives. In Italy, for instance, the requirement is a minimum annual revenue of 15,000€ (12.000€ in 'disadvantaged' regions). To become a certified farmer in the first place, the farm must provide a minimum number of working hours that is calculated based on crop and total cultivated area (control can be more or less lax). In other words, almost exclusively individuals taking over farms that are already productive are eligible for financial support. Albeit formally promoting new entry in agriculture, CAP 'new entry' support measures are actually designed to promote farm succession rather than the establishment of new start-ups. This is also partly true for Japan's national support scheme for new entrants. About half of recipients are farm heirs recognised as certified new farmers as long as they introduce new crops or other forms of innovation upon succession (MAFF 2019c).

management appears as a reasonable target for a business, many aspiring farmers in Japan are not aiming for full-time engagement in agriculture.

Farm size and agricultural subsidies

Kobayashi san, at the time 44 years old, was a trainee at JA Ueda Farm. Despite horticultural training undertaken for two years, he was not planning to become a full-time farmer. 'I have already secured a job at a social welfare company in Ueda by the time I will graduate from the programme. I will start my own grape farm, but I will mostly work in the weekend. I think of farming as a way to foster new projects rather than as a primary source of income.' Fujisaki san, a 36 year old woman from Osaka who started to work at JA Ueda Farm in the spring of 2018, also chose to become a part-time farmer. 'I always dreamed of having my own apple orchard, that's why I came to Nagano. But I know agriculture isn't profitable, so I prefer to have another job and farm in the weekend.' A new potential trainee came to visit Ueda JA in April and on our way to work second-year trainees were answering her many questions. She was anxious about agricultural income. 'Don't worry', said Wakabayashi san, a second-year trainee, 'Being a farmer is not like being a salaryman, you don't earn the same amount of money every month from a single source. Instead, you have diversified sources of income. You can work part-time like many others do here, especially in the winter, for instance, at the skiing ground, or help other farmers when they're busy. There's no shortage of work and people pass jobs to each other so you shouldn't worry too much. Once you're here new opportunities will keep coming up.'

Partly due to the prominence of part-time farming in the country, in Japan the idea that being a farmer involves relying on different sources of income remains widespread. To be sure, that of a 'professional farmer' exclusively deriving her income from agriculture is a very recent idea historically. Peasants have always engaged in off-farm paid labour and this was the normality in all industrialised countries until the second half of the 20th century (Wolf 1982; Mackinnon et al. 1991). In Japan, the old word for peasant (*hyakusho*) translates in fact with '(someone with)

hundreds of jobs.' Even today, the idea of farmers deriving their income exclusively from sales of farm products does not reflect the reality of millions of smallholdings integrating farm income with other farm-related activities, a phenomenon known as *pluriactivity* in rural sociology literature (Fuller and Ray 1992).[194] Pluriactivity is often described as a diversification strategy contributing to the resilience of smallholdings, and, often, to their very survival. At the same time, for many new entrants from the city, diversification is not so much a necessity as a choice linked to lifestyle concerns. The idea of farming full-time can be unappealing, and the 'peasant way' continues to exert a certain allure as demonstrated by its recurring reformulations in popular culture. As discussed in Chapter 3, *Han-nō Han-X* (Half-Farmer, Half-X) is an expression popularised by the homonymous book published in 2003 by Naoki Shiyomi, depicting part-time farming as a way of life. Albeit not particularly original, *Han-nō Han-X* became a popular concept and integral part of the recent rise of pro-rural migration.

Even for aspiring full-time new entry farmers, occasional work seems to be at least initially unavoidable to complement low farm income. All new farmers I met had to work part-time in the early years of farm management, and many continued to rely on occasional jobs, in particular during winter months. The fact that many new farmers choose to derive only part of their income from agriculture is significant insofar as it can explain the fact that half of new agricultural entrants under the national support scheme cannot secure sufficient income from agriculture five years into farm management. This is very plausible, even more so considering the way the scheme is structured. The income-supplementing allowance of ¥1.5 million/year is, in fact, progressively reduced if agricultural income rises beyond ¥1 million.[195] Albeit reasonable, this mechanism removes the incentive to raise farm income while incentivising reliance on off-farm work and, one might argue, under-the-table payments. As a new entry farmer in Tōmi told me: 'Now that farm income is at the point where my allowance would be cut, I feel that even if I worked more it

[194] Economists refer to the same phenomenon with an acronym RNFE, Rural Non-Farm Enterprise, while geographers often use the terms, *multi-local* or *multi-spatial* livelihoods (Djurfeldt 2016).
[195] Allowance is then calculated as follows: (3.5 million – previous year income) x 0.6.

wouldn't make much difference. Next year financial support will end, so I'll have to raise my working pace.'

Subsidies for new entry farmers are at the same time praised and criticised. For the director of JA Saien Kamiina, some people taking new entry subsidies tend to be 'too relaxed' and might be in trouble when provision ends. Shigiya and Ueno (2017:36) point out that subsidies may incentivize some inexperienced farmers to buy unneeded equipment and machinery and prompt them to expand farmed area too quickly. According to the head of Tōmi agricultural office, the national support scheme has had a big impact on new entries in agriculture. 'In the past 20 years about seventy people started a farm in Tōmi and eight of them quit, but since the introduction of the new subsidy package in 2012 only one person quit.' On the other hand, he claimed, of all the certified new farmers who started a farm in recent years, only half succeeded in reaching the 2.5million yen annual income target in five years. In 2018, the first generation of recipients of the national support scheme was about to see the end of income-supplementing subsidies, and the head of Kyoto prefecture agricultural promotion centre was worried about the number of new entrants who might have quit in the following years. The instructor of Komoro agricultural school also thought that once subsidies ended, only about half of new agricultural entrants were going to live solely of agriculture.

Regulation of the national financial support scheme was tightened in 2015 in order to prevent its potential misuse. 'Some people thought they could live on subsidies and fool around in the countryside for a few years, but this is no longer possible.'[196] Recipients of financial support have to keep an updated diary recording their daily activity and on the third year must pass a screening process conducted by the local agricultural committee (*nōgyō īnkai*) to make sure that farm development is in line with the business plan. On the other hand, the implementation of agricultural policy leans on local institutions and problems arise when different agenda exist at the local level

[196] Interview with an official at the National Chamber of Agriculture.

and at the central (policy) level. Whilst for the MAFF the goal of support measures is to promote generational renewal, farm enlargement, and land consolidation, for depopulating rural regions the priority is attracting new settlers. It is perhaps unsurprising that local institutions might turn a blind eye on improper behaviour and flexibly interpret requirements set by the MAFF. As an official at the National Chamber of Agriculture told me, although applicants should in principle manage at least 50are of land (2ha for Hokkaido) to become certified new farmers and be eligible for financial support, there have been cases in which municipalities have approved applicants with only 1are of land (100m2).

Unlike the national scheme, local support measures for agricultural entrants are not tied to farm enlargement, so grants are not bound to minimum cultivated areas or income targets. These schemes are widespread, albeit small. Saku city offers, for instance, income-supplementing grants of ¥1 million for the first year of farm management, ¥0.2 million in the second and third year, and ¥10.000 per month as a contribution to house rental. Nagano prefecture grants ¥40,000 per month for up to two years of training and ¥10,000 per month for the first five years of farm management. Following the example of Shimane prefecture, Kyoto prefecture was about to introduce a new aid package named '*Han-nō Han-X*' specifically targeting aspiring part-time farmers relocating in rural municipalities. According to a representative at Kyoto promotion centre for agriculture, *Han-nō Han-X* is a good model for rural revitalisation. 'The priority is to support rural regions, so farm size doesn't matter. When people come to our desk, we show them different job adds so that they can see how many side-jobs are available in the countryside.' Many young new entry farmers in Kyoto prefecture choose to engage in part-time agriculture. Some of them would like to live in Kyoto city and commute to the farm, and as an alternative, many opt for nearby towns such as Kameoka or Ōhara. On the contrary, participants from various organizations related to agriculture in Nagano prefecture agree that the vast majority of aspiring farmers aim to be full-timers. Policy reflects (or is reflected in) such differences. Unlike Kyoto prefecture, local administrations in Nagano prefecture do not support '*Han-nō Han-X'*– like models. For the director of JA Ueda Farm, although some

urban-rural migrants like the idea, the explicit goal of support measures is to foster a new generation of professional farmers.

Despite small pockets of support set up by prefectures and municipalities to attract new settlers with an interest in farming, the viability of small-scale and part-time agriculture has been progressively hindered by the withdrawal of government subsidies and their redirection toward large, incorporated farms. Recognising the need to consolidate farmland and expand farm units, the MAFF has in fact gradually tied subsidisation to farm enlargement. Certified new farmers maintain their status for five years and are then encouraged to become so-called 'certified farmers' (*nintei nōgyō-sha*). This entitles them to a vast array of benefits, including income-stabilisation subsidies, low-interest loans, tax exemptions, investment subsidies, advantageous pension schemes, etc. (MAFF 2019e). To be recognised as certified farmers, applicants must once again submit a business plan indicating that the farm will generate a minimum annual income of ¥5.8 million (about £49,000) within five years. Unlike the goal set for certified new farmers, ¥5.8 million income is a relatively ambitious target requiring a significant amount of land, investments, and availability of labour. As for the full-time/part-time choice, this poses a dilemma for new entrants, who must choose whether to expand farm operations or be excluded from core subsidies.

Rie and her husband moved to Komoro city to become apple growers in 2013. The farm was profitable, and they were planting a few new trees but had chosen not to expand any further. 'We don't want to hire people or be worried to fall back on work. We want to be the one growing these delicious apples. Friends help us in busy periods, and that's enough for us.' Ueno san was a 38 year old man from Tokyo living in a mountain hamlet in Nagano prefecture with his wife and two children. He complemented income from his rice farm with various side jobs. 'I don't want to expand the farm for the sake of subsidies. I'd have to buy expensive machinery and find more customers to repay my debts. Then I'd have to hire people to farm instead of me because I'm too busy with paperwork, sales, etc. It would take away the pleasure of farming. I don't want to be as stressed as when I worked in the city.' Shibuya san, a trainee at JA Ueda Farm, worked as a

convenience store manager in Chiba for about twenty years. He had no intention to expand his farm in the future. 'I don't want to deal with employees anymore. Hiring part-timers and organising work shifts were the worst parts of my previous job. I like agriculture because it allows me to work at my own pace, so I don't want to turn it into a busy business.' Many trainees at JA Ueda also considered farm expansion as undesirable: 'There's no need to expand too much and go crazy. If you need extra money you can find a job for the winter. A side job can also help hedging risk from harvest failure.' According to an instructor of Nagano agricultural school, many new farmers choose not to expand farm operations beyond a certain level because they don't want to get too busy. 'Many people came here to escape the stress of their previous jobs. It's understandable that they prefer to take things slowly.'

To be sure, not only are many entrepreneurial new entrants willing to expand their business, but farm enlargement is not necessarily the result of a deliberate plan. Komoda san was an ex Ueda JA trainee now running his own grape farm. 'I wasn't planning to expand this much, but old farmers kept asking me to take care of their fields and I just couldn't refuse. I owe them a lot and feel a sense of responsibility toward the local community. Luckily the farm is profitable, so I guess it's fine even if I'm busier.' Tanaka san, an organic farmer from Kyoto, also wasn't planning to expand his farm to the current point. 'When I started, I wanted to keep the farm small, but with two children I had to raise my income. The farm was doing well so two years ago I decided to rent more land and hire a full-time employee.'

The family farm and the peasantry

The progressive shift of Japan's agricultural policy toward payment mechanisms excluding smallholdings is highly contested. Criticism does not come exclusively from JA, but also 'pro-peasant' advocates emphasising the merits of family farms against the progressive industrialisation-

corporatisation of agriculture.[197] Family farms are typically praised for being more resource-efficient, resilient, and employing a larger number of people per unit of farmland.[198] The importance of sustaining family farms is also linked to non-economic considerations, such as the need for preventing rural depopulation, farmland abandonment, preserve traditional (peasant) cultures, etc.[199] The idea of the family farm is prominent in popular culture, but its definition is problematic. The convergence of family and farm is not as precise as it perhaps once was historically, neither are family farms necessarily distinct from other types of farms in their business models or practices. Many family farms are small in scale, but some family-owned farm business can be quite extensive and involve multiple holdings (Woods 2014:32).[200] Because of these reasons, the dichotomy between family and corporate agriculture is often reframed as a distinction between peasant and capitalist/entrepreneurial modes of production (e.g. Van der Ploeg 2008). Even this distinction, however, is not free from ambiguities. For instance, reliance on wage labour was already indicated by Lenin as the key distinguishing element between peasant and capitalist farming (Cook and Binford 1986:5),[201] but many smallholdings rely on paid labour during busy periods. These and other contradictions are also evident in Japan's case, where smallholdings have been

[197] 'Peasant' has long been used as a derogatory term in many societies. However, at different times in recent history, it has been variously reconceptualised and mobilised (Brass 2000). Bernstein (2016) provides a critique of 'the peasant' used as a political category in rural sociology literature. In Japan too, the peasant has seen a glorification in certain intellectual currents. The 'Association of Small-scale Peasant Farming' was established in 2016 by academics and social activists working against the degradation of family farms and remote rural communities. An outline of this literature is provided by Hisano et al. (2018).

[198] See for instance Netting (1993). Small-scale family farming has long been described by scholars and commentators as the best option for Japanese agriculture given its unique geographic and ecological conditions (e.g. Morita 1975).

[199] Because the family farm (*ie*) and the village (*mura*) historically represent the basic units of the social organisation of rural communities, arguments for sustaining smallholdings transcend considerations of mere economic rationality.

[200] Attempts to define family farms have been made by several authors, with varying emphases (e.g. family ownership, family labour, family management).

[201] Lenin argued for instance that peasants do not become capitalists until wage labour is 'systematically,' rather than 'occasionally' employed (Cook and Binford 1986:5). In Marxian scholarship, capital accumulation is another element used to distinguish between petty commodity producers and petty entrepreneurs, with the former typically aiming for mere reproduction (Hakken et al. 2019:211).

organised and integrated into the agri-food system by agricultural cooperatives, thus losing many of their alleged 'peasant-like' features.[202]

The future of the family farm or the peasantry is a long-standing debate in economic history, anthropology, and rural sociology. The effects of modernization and globalization on rural people, and in particular peasant farmers, are the focus of a large body of ethnographic literature. Mostly focusing on developing countries, anthropologists have explored the transformation of agrarian societies, emphasising the importance of a 'house model' of the economy encompassing 'frugality and the aspiration to self-sufficiency, even when the realities of peasant incorporation increasingly contradicted this into wider systems of markets and state power' (Hann 2018:11). In anthropology as in rural sociology, a Marxist approach has been often adopted in the study of the peasantry (e.g. Leeds 1977; Scott 1977; Berdichewsky 1979). Peasants are conceived as petty commodity producers progressively displaced or converted into capitalist farmers through processes of capital accumulation in the agri-food complex. Rural proletarianization allows capitalist farms to absorb the labour of peasants, who can no longer derive sufficient livelihoods from their land. The differentiation of peasants into rural proletariat and capitalist farmers has however been challenged by many anthropologists avoiding a strictly political-economy approach and exploring how peasants are variously constituted in different times and places (Harris 2005). Wolf (1982) was among the first to undermine the reductionism and fatalism surrounding peasantries and rural populations, while Kearney (1996) called into question the very notion of the peasantry in a world where the boundaries between rural and urban spheres are increasingly blurred, and the rural population combines different sources of income. According to Kearney (Ibid:124), the existence of

[202] Pro-peasant advocates are for instance critical of JA system for promoting excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. In its typified form, peasant farming is characterised by a maximisation of its 'ecological capital' and sustainability through high labour intensity (as opposed to land intensity), reliance on traditional knowledge and farming practices such as polyculture (as opposed to monoculture) improving soil fertility and reducing dependence on purchased inputs, use of traditional cultivars (as opposed to patented seeds), and a culture of cooperation and 'knowledge commons' (as opposed to the drive of capital to privatise all aspects of production) (Bernstein 2016). At least in industrialised countries, peasantism is also generally associated with farm pluriactivity (as opposed to professional farming) and the promotion of food sovereignty through alternative food networks (as opposed to global value chains).

multiple economic strategies and identities calls for a rejection of essentialist categorizations such as 'peasant.' Individuals are better characterized as 'polybians,' constantly adjusting to shifting economic, cultural, and social conditions. In this perspective, research must focus on the individual responding to the heterogeneity of rural households and communities. While subscribing to Kearney's rejection of essentialist categories and to his claim for a historical approach in anthropology, Shuren (2003) argues that the problem of essentializing cannot be solved by inventing a new term and implicitly postulating a unidirectional development from peasant to 'polybian.' To overcome this problem, he follows Anthony Leeds (1977), who proposed considering 'peasant' as an economic role rather than a cultural type. Ferguson (2013) too rejects a political economy approach to the peasantry, emphasising that while discussions on land use too often reduce the land question to the agrarian question, producing agricultural goods is only one of many ways in which land is used, and not necessarily the most important.

The demise of the peasantry and its subsumption to capital did not indeed take place as predicted by many. Even in industrialised countries, family farms demonstrated unexpected resilience and persistence, and still represent the vast majority of all farms (Lowder et al. 2016).[203] Smallholdings demonstrated their ability to outcompete well-capitalised farm enterprises based on waged labour. Family farmers can work for a prolonged period of time at nominally negative profits and yet survive, an impossibility for capitalist farming (Shanin 1986). On the other hand, family farms did not emerge unscathed from social and technological change. Traditional patterns of farm inheritance have been disrupted as more and more farm heirs choose to pursue alternative careers elsewhere. Modernisation improved the productivity of family farms and in many cases increased their income, but required investment in new machinery often led to rising indebtedness and vulnerability to economic fluctuations (Woods 2014). Nevertheless, it was the recent wave of neoliberal policy that struck family farms the hardest: trade liberalisations, withdrawal of

[203] For a discussion on family farming and its competitive advantages, see Djurfeldt (2016).

government subsidies, and growing market concentration, upstream and downstream, among others, that contributed to pushing millions of smallholdings worldwide out of business. McMichael (2005) describes this transition as part of a third, global corporate food regime proceeding through mechanisms of 'accumulation by dispossession.'

The tendency of agribusiness to withdraw from agricultural production and focus instead on credit, the supply of inputs, and distribution, while leaving farming to smallholdings and 'skimming' them rather than replacing them was already evident in the 1970s (Friedmannn 1978). Farms are progressively integrated into food chains and must for instance comply with rules dictated by large agribusiness, the typical example being the diffusion of private certification standards excluding smallholdings from major market outlets. As Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal (2010:188) point out, Kautsky and Lenin already suggested that capital might, in particular circumstances, 'prefer to sustain a hybrid non-capitalist rural economy subsumed to capital because of the unique characteristics of agricultural production as well as the capacity of family farm production to, as Marx noted, depress real wages by working longer and harder, and in so doing sustain an ability to compete with agrarian capital' (Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal 2010:188).

As Hebinick (2018:230) points out, following Lenin's view on processes of capitalist development by differentiation, numerous scholars have argued that the peasantry will eventually disappear to be replaced by 'a new breed of rural entrepreneurs able to withstand global competition for land, capital and labour' (Vanhaute 2012; Peemans 2013; Araghi 1995; Wallerstein 1974; Bernstein 2010; in Hebinick 2018:230). In this perspective, de-agrarianisation is inevitably accompanied by a process of de-peasantisation, typically through progressive differentiation of farmers. Some scholars, however, have more recently called attention on parallel processes of re-peasantisation. Van der Ploeg (2008:155) describes re-peasantisation in Europe as a far-reaching shift combining traditional farming activities with new ones. In contrast to the many scholars of agrarian change suggesting that pluriactivity is a sign of the disappearance of the peasantry, he indicates that it is frequently associated with wellbeing and with efforts to generate non-farm

income for investment in farming. Hisano et al. (2018) argue that, in Japan too, recent processes of agrarian change produced new forms of re-peasantisation such as hamlet-based community farms (*shūraku einō*) discussed in Chapter 3 and new entry farmers from a non-farming background. The values and priorities of many new agricultural entrants from the city are indeed akin to an alleged 'peasant way.' Many urban-rural migrants aim for part-time engagement in agriculture, are interested in reviving traditional (peasant) practices-lifestyles (Aikawa 2017), and place great importance on sustainability issues.[204] Some, like Ueno san, also have a clear view of what rural revitalisation ought to be. 'I wish more and more people from the city would come to live in villages and farm. I don't think creating large corporate farms is the right way to revitalise rural regions. Media keep talking about strengthening Japanese agriculture, but for me, the priority is sustaining shrinking communities.'

Agrarian change and rural revitalisation

Ueno san's comment raises two important issues: the distinction between agricultural development and rural revitalisation, and the contribution of small/family farms vis-à-vis 'corporate agriculture' to the latter. Agricultural and rural development are often related, but a conceptual distinction should be made between the two. In Japan and many other countries, state support aimed at improving the livelihood of rural communities has long been delivered under the guise of agricultural subsidies.[205] Lack of clarity in policy and policy goals is, however, undesirable because measures contributing to rural revitalisation can be ineffective or even detrimental toward

[204] On the other hand, statistics show that agriculture is increasingly considered as a profession rather than as a lifestyle choice for recipients of the national support scheme. Considerations such as 'agriculture allows me to be my own boss' or 'profit from agriculture depends on how you do things' have increased, while considerations such as 'I want to do organic farming' or 'I like village lifestyle' have decreased (NCA 2017:58). At the same time, it could be argued that new entrants using the national support scheme are overall more entrepreneurial than those entering agriculture through alternative routes. Another argument against the supposed peasant-like character of many new agricultural entrants is that farmers following the 'peasant way' are often opposing JA for ideological reasons and tend to live and work disconnected from the farming community, defeating de facto one of the purposes of peasantism.

[205] This has typically been done by appealing to the idea of multifunctionality of agriculture. As discussed in Chapter 3, in the mid-1970s, Japan's agricultural policy shifted to a 'comprehensive agricultural policy' (*sōgō nōsei*) placing increasing emphasis on rural development and public works.

agricultural development. This is especially true in Japan, where several scholars and commentators have indicated protectionist-welfarist agricultural policy as the major cause of the decline of agriculture.[206] Can large, corporate farms contribute not only to agricultural development but also to rural revitalisation? According to Shimazaki san, the founder of Top River, a well-known agricultural corporation based in Miyota city, large farms can generate employment in ways that family farms cannot thanks to their superior business model.

Hideki Shimazaki, the current president and director of Top River, started his career working in sales in a famous confectionery maker after graduating from university. He then joined a vegetable brokerage company managed by his stepfather. After becoming president, in 2000 he founded Top River to develop an agricultural production business. He set five principles for the company: no reliance on wholesale markets, sales entirely based on agricultural contracts, no ownership of farmland, separate production and management divisions, support to the independence of employees. Top River revenues increased rapidly, and in 2008 it reached one billion yen. The company now hires over 50 full-time employees (of which six are sales representatives including Shimazaki san) and about the same number of part-time workers. The total farmed area is over 200ha, with lettuce, cabbage, and Chinese cabbage as main crops. Top River established a partnership with eleven independent farmers (previous employees-trainees who started their own farm) and regularly purchases produce from JA on a contract basis (produce from partner farmers and JA amount to about half of total sales). Shimazaki san's mission is to train a new generation of agricultural entrepreneurs aiming for a minimum of ¥30 million (about £230,000) annual revenues. All of his previous trainees (36 in total, of which 13 were training in 2018) were running successful farms all over Japan. He regards family farms as something of the past and believes that, in order to

[206] A widespread argument is that support to small and part-time farmers hinder farmland consolidation and the formation of larger, more efficient farming units (e.g. Yamashita 2015). The idea of subsidies keeping small farmers on the land is, however, too simplistic. Retiree farmers (who represent a large share of small-scale farmers) hardly profit from agriculture but keep on farming because it represents a source of pride, enjoyment, and because they want their land to be passed on to their heirs. For instance, shipping rice to relatives and children living in cities is still common and for many old farmers represents an incentive to keep on farming. The formation of larger farming units was and still is first and foremost impeded by land issues discussed in Chapter 3.

survive, Japanese agriculture and rural areas do not need a new generation of small farmers, but large, efficient agricultural corporations making up for Japan's shrinking farming population. 'People at JA still hope to keep up the number of farmers, it's their way of thinking. But that's completely unrealistic. If there were a hundred people farming, only ten will be soon left and they will have to expand farm size. So far agriculture has been a family business, but things will have to change. No more *nōka* (family farmers), but *nōgyō-sha* (professional farmers).[207] They will be the future bearers of Japanese agriculture.' Shimazaki san praises the benefits of the large company-family, depicting it as preferable to a situation whereby a myriad of small independent producers compete without cooperating in farm management. 'There is no difference between agriculture and other industries: you need a capable manager and hardworking employees. Here we teach that a company is like a family and I truly consider these boys (trainees) as my children. A large family can achieve greater goals through cooperation. A large company pays its employees, the worker at the gas station, the truck driver, etc. This is how you create employment and contribute to rural revitalisation.' According to Shimazaki san, aspiring farmers today have all they need to succeed. 'When young folks come here, I tell them that they don't need any savings, but only their health, their heart, and the desire to become managers. Today new entry farmers can get ¥3.7million interest-free loans. That's all you need if you know what you're doing and plan things carefully. If you come here and work hard, you'll be alright.'

As Shimazaki san points out, farms will likely continue to expand. Although small-scale farm households of 2ha or less still accounted for 80.5% of the total in 2015 (excluding Hokkaido), looking at changes in the number of farms by area of cultivated land under management, it appears clear that the trend is toward greater concentration. Between 2010 and 2015, farms under 1ha and farms between 1-5ha declined respectively by 22.5% and 17.6%, while farms over 5ha increased

[207] *Nōka*(農家) includes the ideogram for 'house' and conveys the idea of a family farmer. *Nōgyōsha* (農業者) includes the ideogram for 'industry' and thus conveys the idea of a commercial farmer.

(MAFF 2015a).[208] There is also a steady trend of increasing incorporated organised management entities that include both agricultural production corporations and non-farm private corporations (see Chapter 3). This has also been the trend in Europe, where the general pattern of development within the agricultural sector has been towards a greater concentration of agriculture within the hands of relatively few large farms (Eurostsat 2016:28).[209] Shimazaki san's idea of large farms putting the wellbeing of employees before profits (thus avoiding typical risks of 'corporatisation') is debatable, but it is fair to say that larger farms can potentially contribute to rural employment through solid business models. This, however, largely depends on what crops are being grown. The example of the EU CAP shows that farmland concentration and subsidies tied to farm size can lead to a decline of rural employment and food self-sufficiency. With the introduction of the Single Payment Scheme in 2003, the CAP moved from production subsidies (based on production volume) to subsidies based on farmed area.[210] This was justified on the ground that income support should be decoupled from production so to incentivise farmers to produce according to market demand and avoid the overproduction of certain crops (European Commission 2017).[211] Big agribusinesses and large landowners are currently the primary beneficiaries of CAP provision, with 20% of EU farms capturing about 80% of basic payments (EU Factcheck 23 May 2019).[212] Large farms tend to specialise on cash crops (e.g. cereals and oilseeds) requiring large areas, high investments, and little manual labour. Not only this has contributed toward the decline of vegetables and fruit production and therefore of food self-sufficiency,[213] but also raises doubts on the impact of farmland concentration on rural employment.

[208] 5-10h (+3.2%), 10-20ha (+22%), 20-30ha (+23.4%), 30-50ha (+27.2%), 50-100ha (+31-9%), 100+ha (+34-8%).
[209] In most countries, farms larger than 100 hectares control most of the national farmland (Eurostat 2016:60).
[210] Two main criteria have been used to delineate farm size: one is based on a classification of farms in economic terms based on their standard output, while the other one is based on the utilised agricultural area (UAA).
[211] Two objections can be moved to this line of argument. First, it is theoretically possible to adjust production subsidies so that market signals remain discernible. Second, subsidies based on farmed area also produce market distortions
[212] This figure should be considered in light of the fact that two-fifths of EU farms are small subsistence households. In 2013, there were 4.4 million farms in the EU-28 with a standard output less than €2,000 accounting for 39.6% of all farms (Eurostat 2016: 30).
[213] In Europe fruit and vegetable production has shrunk, while imports more than doubled in value, from €10 billion in 2000 to €23 billion in 2015 (Eurostat 2016:36).

The contribution of large, corporate farms to rural development remains a controversial, political topic. Generalisations cannot be made given the diversity of socio-economic context and regulations in different countries. Japanese agriculture and regional Japan more generally are now facing numerous challenges, and potential risks associated with greater concentration-corporatisation of agriculture are probably not one of them. The current small-scale agricultural structure poses instead a major limitation to agricultural development as farms' small size makes them unlikely to provide sufficient income and thus appeal to successors, a common occurrence in smallholder agriculture countries (Lukas and Sutherland 2015).[214] In a 2011 survey conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture on 2,598 farm households near urban areas, 61.8% of respondents with annual sales of 7 million yen or more revealed that they had secured successors for their operations, while the corresponding figure for households earning one million yen or less was a mere 30.7% (MAFF 2011:9, in Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016). The correlation between farm size and problems of succession are evident in Nagano prefecture, where municipalities characterised by larger farming units are less afflicted by problems of farm succession (see Chapter 1). The small size of farms is a primary cause for Japan's problem of generational renewal in agriculture and arguably the most crucial argument against small-scale agriculture in industrialised countries as it calls into question its intergenerational sustainability. On the other hand, a counterargument to the above observation is that many small farms are not unprofitable because of their acreage, but because of their business model. Many farms in Japan have been operated as side-businesses and were never designed to generate substantial income, as in the case of rice farms. In some cases, farms that were once profitable became uncompetitive because of lack of innovation (e.g. fruit farms). Many of these small farms could be turned into profitable enterprises through

[214] In Europe, countries with a high number of smallholdings (Hungary, Romania, Greece, Italy, Portugal, etc.) are more affected by the problem of ageing and generational renewal. Between 2005 and 2013, the number of farmers in Europe (EU-27) fell from 14.5 million to 10.7 million, mostly due to the disappearance of smallholdings (Eurostat 2016).

appropriate investments.[215] After all, in Japan as elsewhere, there are countless examples of tiny, yet profitable farms.[216]

Conclusions

All over the world, access to capital represents one of the biggest challenges facing aspiring farmers from a non-farming background. In Japan, new entry subsidies have had a significant impact on the trend of new entry farmers in the last decade, but the way financial support is designed poses a dilemma for many new farmers, who must choose whether to expand farm operations or be excluded from core subsidies. The redirection of agricultural subsidies toward larger farms has the purpose of promoting land consolidation and possibly that of reducing total agricultural spending. Promoting land consolidation and the formation of larger farming units is a reasonable policy goal given the numerous problems springing from Japan's agrarian structure, in particular issues of generational renewal. On the other hand, incentivising farm enlargement does not necessarily result in land consolidation. As long as farmland transfers continue to be hindered by factors discussed in Chapter 3, the expansion of farmed area will remain counterproductive in many cases. Moreover, smallholdings can be very efficient, so distinction should be made between different crops and farming models. While extensive crops such as rice require economies of scale to increase efficiency, labour/capital-intensive crops can be efficiently grown on a small-scale basis and even on a part-time basis. This is especially true in areas characterised by labour shortage where small-scale agriculture remains the only viable model. JA and pro-peasant advocates do not oppose the formation of larger farming units but criticise agricultural policy for disregarding smallholdings' role entirely. 'Officials and whitepapers only talk about farm enlargement and incorporation. Family farms are seldom mentioned, and there is no plan or long-term vision for them.'[217] Japan has a severe problem of generational renewal in agriculture. In this perspective,

[215] A paddy field converted into vegetable field can increase revenues tenfold.
[216] I visited several farms in Japan that were less than 1ha and provided a livelihood for families of several members.
[217] Interview with a new entry organic farmer in Ōhara, Kyoto.

many argue, promotion of farm enlargement needs not to be accompanied by the eradication of smallholdings. 'Small farms and large farms can and should coexist. Family farms provide labour to larger enterprises, which in turn can provide income-supplementing opportunities to small farmers.'[218] Advocating more flexible forms of support for new entry farmers, Aikawa (2017) speaks, for instance, of a diversification of the 'farmers of the future' (*tayōkana ninaite*).

All over the world, the disappearance of family farms has not yet taken place as predicted by many (Vanhaute 2012; Peemans 2013; Araghi 1995; Hobsbawm 1994; Wallerstein 1974; Bernstein 2010). This is especially true in Japan, where concentration in agriculture has been less marked than in most capitalist economies. Given the still relatively high number of micro/subsistence farms, one might even claim that de-peasantisation did not really take place, although the application of concepts such as de/re-peasantisation ultimately rests on the definition of alleged peasant or entrepreneurial modes of production. Such distinction is, of course, a spectrum and not a dichotomy. New entrants can be more or less 'entrepreneurial,' but even aspiring small-scale/part-time farmers are ultimately petty entrepreneurs. Differences rest on income targets, and business models adopted, also subject to change in time. New entrants from city opting for 'lifestyle farming' (as dubbed in Chapter 2) might be described as contributing to processes of re-peasantisation (Hisano et al. 2018), but, at least in Japan's case, differentiation appears as a more useful (and less ambiguous) concept explaining ongoing processes of agrarian change.

For new entrants aiming for part-time and small-scale farming models, access to capital is certainly complicated by recent shifts in agricultural policy. However, Japanese new farmers are arguably better off than their counterparts in other industrialised countries in this respect, as demonstrated by comparison with EU CAP policy. Moreover, together with MAFF subsidies, Japanese new farmers can also benefit from numerous, more flexible forms of financial support provided by prefectures, municipalities, and agricultural cooperatives. That half of new entry

[218] Interview with a Ueno san, the new entry farmer mentioned above.

farmers cannot secure sufficient income from their activity five years into farm management is unlikely due to difficulties in accessing capital, but rather to the fact that many new entrants choose not to make agriculture their sole source of income. The fact that some individuals might be 'slacking off' on subsidies and relying on under-the-table payments also represent plausible contributing factors.

Chapter 7

Accessing markets: marketing, distribution, and price formation

Together with farmland, housing, farming skills, and capital, new entry farmers must secure market outlets for their produce. What market environment do they face and how do they navigate it? Similar to other countries, direct sales represent a marketing strategy often adopted by new entry farmers in order to raise profit margins. As shown in the first part of the chapter, however, not only does the success of business models centred on direct sales depend on marketing skills and farm location, but only fruit farmers and polyculture vegetable farmers can rely on direct marketing as a viable option. As discussed in previous literature, so-called alternative food networks represent by and large a market niche (e.g. Kneafsey et al. 2008; Goodman et al. 2012:189).

While alternative food networks have recently received much attention in anthropology, sociology, and geography, different configurations of 'conventional' food distribution have enjoyed much less consideration. This chapter considers some peculiar features of Japan's fresh food distribution from a broad political economy perspective. The diffusion of agricultural cooperatives encompassing the majority of producers nationwide and the survival of a large wholesale market for fresh food are discussed historically and in relation to economic theory.

The analysis of Japan's food wholesale market focuses on the notable overlapping of market principle and marketplace, two elements typically contrasted in anthropological studies of markets (Applbaum 2005). This convergence is shown to produce a transparent mechanism of price formation when compared to modern food supply chains based on agricultural contracting. Transparency of price formation is postulated in equilibrium models of perfect competition but is rarely a feature of real markets. Social scientists have long understood prices as the outcome of struggles between market actors rather than as naturally emerging from the market mechanism (Durkheim 1947; Weber 1978; Bourdieu 2005) and emphasised the tendency under capitalism towards market concentration. However, little attention has been paid in economic anthropology or

economic sociology to the role of institutions in fostering fair competition and to the strategies adopted by economic actors in the attempt to balance asymmetric power relations (Gordon 2010; Beckert 2011; Luetchford and Orlando 2019). Problems springing from the adoption of the market mechanism have been largely documented by anthropologists discussing theories of value and the moral economy, but ethnographic studies seldom consider markets in terms of their departure from equilibrium models. The analysis of fresh food distribution in Japan developed in this chapter addresses the above shortcomings and provides new insights into the political economy of agri-food systems.

Farm direct marketing

'Farmers farm and JA sells: this is the way things have always been done.'[219] Since Japan's post-war recovery, agricultural cooperatives have been responsible for collecting and selling national agricultural products. High prices sustained by prolonged economic growth guaranteed high enough returns for millions of Japanese smallholders, who had little incentive to look for alternative, possibly more profitable, market outlets. Relying on agricultural cooperatives has long been the normality and made things extremely easy for farmers, who benefitted from an array of services including financing, provision of farming inputs, technical support, accounting services, access to sorting-processing-shipment facilities, the distribution and sale of produce, and a reliable payment system. Farmers truly only had to farm. Even today, JA remains the backbone of Japanese agriculture, but lowering farm gate prices and the emergence of new business opportunities have gradually eroded its monopoly. Unlike the old generation of farmers, new agricultural entrants face today a more diversified market and are confronted with numerous marketing opportunities.

'Many aspiring farmers from cities have no idea of what to grow. They choose a region based on its weather or geography and then pick one among the popular crops in the area.'[220] Nagano

[219] A recurrent comment you hear from Japanese farmers.
[220] Interview with the head of Nagano prefecture consultation centre for agriculture.

prefecture is well equipped to help aspiring farmers with their decision according to different priorities and constraints (capital and farmland availability, desired income/working hours, etc). A booklet published by the prefectural consultation centre for agriculture nicely summarises all the key information: tables and charts compare investment and production costs, revenues, and expected income for different crops per area unit, as well as monthly working hours divided by type of operation. For instance, taking the recommend area one person alone can farm, 50are of Fuji apples provide an average annual income of ¥985,000, while for strawberries grown in a greenhouse on 8are the expected income is ¥1,472,000. Seedless *kyōhō* grape is still the most widespread table grape variety in Nagano, but nowadays only guarantees an expected income of ¥450,000 on an orchard of 15are. Of course, such average figures say little about the actual economic performance of different producers. The same bunch of grapes sold at ¥400 through JA consignment system can in fact earn ¥1,000 or more when shipped directly to a customer in Tokyo.

Direct sales (or farm gate sales) are a well-known marketing strategy used by smallholders all over the world to increase profit margins. *Chokuhan* (direct sales) refers to the direct marketing of agricultural produce to consumers, restaurants, greengrocers, and other small retailers.[221] With few exceptions (e.g. organic farmers), however, the direct marketing of farm products has not been particularly widespread in Japan until recently. Farmers markets are almost non-existent, and only fruit farmers have been relying on home parcel delivery (*takuhai*) or farm tourism (*nōgyō kankō*) alongside their primary distribution (JA). In the past decade, however, not only did the popularisation of local consumption practices (*chisan-chishō*) prompt the establishment of numerous direct sale stores (*chokubaijo*) all over the country,[222] but the diffusion of internet social media also enhanced direct marketing opportunities for smallholdings. Numerous books have been published on the topic and many agricultural entrants from the city successfully took advantage of

[221] In Japanese, '*chokuhan'* is also used to indicate agricultural cooperatives' sales to food-related companies (supermarkets, food processors, restaurant chains). Cooperatives traditionally sell members' produce via wholesalers, so direct deals with food companies came to be known as '*chokuhan*.'

[222] Until a decade ago, this kind of stores used to be found exclusively in motorway service areas (*michi no eki*). In 2017, in Japan, there were 23,590 *chokubaijo* (Morioka 2018).

their marketing skills compensating for lack of farming experience and limited farmland access. Fruit and organic vegetable are the crops that can most benefit from direct marketing, and not by accident are they so popular among new entrants from the city.[223] As discussed in Chapter 5, fruit in Japan is a high-end product often used for gifts. If properly marketed, fruit can sell at a very high price. Direct marketing allows producers to develop a relationship of trust with their customers and 'instil' extra value into their products. Compared to standardised produce found in supermarkets, these are less commoditised. Fruit farmers in Nagano typically sell their produce through a combination of JA consignment and direct sales.[224] Directly marketed produce is typically shipped as a parcel. Customers are mostly individuals living in metropolitan areas, and occasionally speciality food stores and restaurants. Direct sales can be profitable but entail extra work and marketing skills. 'Finding new customers isn't easy. It takes time to build up and retain a reliable pool of customers. It all depends on your priorities. If you like marketing and public relations, you can produce less and sell at a higher unit price; otherwise you can focus on production and conveniently sell through JA.'[225]

After quitting his job in construction in Tokyo in 2015, Koganezawa san moved to Saku city to take over his grandparents' land and become a farmer. He had no training in horticulture and learned farming techniques mainly through textbooks. He now sells half of his produce (mostly prunes and peaches) through JA, and the rest through parcel delivery and the local direct sales store (*chokubaijo*). 'Real money comes from direct sales. Of course, relying on JA is convenient. They take all your produce and sell it for you. But I don't think I could make a living selling exclusively through JA, so my goal for now is to continue expanding direct sales.' Koganezawa's customers are mainly individuals from Tokyo gathered through his social network and internet social media. 'The

[223] New farmers mainly market their produce through JA and direct sales (NCA 2017:52).
[224] According to Ueda JA sales manager, fruit farmers in Ueda district sells on average 2/3rd or their produce through direct sales and the remaining 1/3rd through JA consignment.
[225] Interview with a new entry (grape) farmer in Ueda city.

key is taking great pictures and keeping customers involved on social media. They must get to know you and what you do. It's very important to establish a relation of trust.'

Rie and her husband also came to Nagano from Tokyo to become apple farmers. They settled in Komoro city in 2013 without any agricultural background and successfully built their business around farm tourism (fruit picking). Every year many customers visit their orchard to spend a day in nature and purchase apples for them and their friends. Rie and her husband progressively expanded direct sales and now sell about 70% of their produce through parcel delivery, 20% through fruit picking, and the remaining 10% at the local *chokubaijo*. The farm is small but profitable and their apples sell at a price of about 50% higher than that of neighbouring farmers (¥7,000 for a box of 22 apples, over ¥300 per apple).

Not everyone thinks farmers should be in charge of marketing. 'Farmers should focus their job, which is to grow high-quality products. If you spend time on marketing, the quality will be affected.'[226] I doubt Koganezawa's prunes or Rie's apples are better than those grown by local farmers after a lifetime spent on the land, but their strategy proves to be financially successful. Even the director of JA Ueda Farm agreed that fruit farmers should expand direct sales and work hard on marketing: 'Prices paid by JA for fruit are low. I always emphasise the importance of direct marketing with trainees.' This does not mean that JA should be excluded entirely. As many new entry farmers told me, JA is beneficial. Agricultural cooperatives never refuse a lot, even of low quality (though it will be graded and paid accordingly), so it is a good idea to maintain good relations and give to JA what cannot be sold through other channels. This is especially true in the early years of farm management when produce is usually far from perfect, and it can be challenging to sell anywhere other than JA.

[226] Interview with an old apple farmer in Komoro city.

For organic (vegetable) farmers, relying on JA is not an option. JA does not handle organic produce, and farmers must sell their crop directly to consumers or grocery stores/restaurants.[227] Japan's organic movement developed in the early 1970s as an alternative food system centred around producers-consumers partnership groups known as *teikei*.[228] The progressive decline of *teikei* from the mid-1980s, however, gave way to individual sales agreements between farmers and consumers, typically in the form of a parcel containing a set of vegetables delivered at home at a regular frequency (so-called vegetable box schemes) (Kondoh 2015). This remains the most common outlet for small-scale (polyculture) organic farmers.[229]

Fuji san and his wife were born and raised in Tokyo and in 2005 moved to Saku city to become organic vegetable farmers. They are in their early 40s, university-educated, and both have study and work experience abroad. Since they established the farm in 2007, their marketing strategy was built around a vegetable box scheme. Fuji san's wife, who used to work in marketing, is exclusively in charge of sales. Allocating almost half of the available labour to marketing might sound unusual for a farm, but their decision paid off. They started with about 40 customers, mostly friends and relatives, but now have more than 180 customers, including ten restaurants. The farm is very profitable and provides a livelihood to Fuji san, his wife, and their three children.

Isomura san is another organic farmer from Tokyo living in Saku city. Before moving to Saku he worked for a restaurant in Tokyo, which became his first outlet when he started to farm in 2004. He is very popular as one of the early organic producers in the area, and the farm provides a living for him, his wife, and their two children. He also sells most of his produce through a vegetable box scheme, mostly to families in Tokyo.

[227] JA does not refuse organically grown produce, but does not market it as such (no premium price). Some agricultural cooperatives (e.g. some JAs in Wakayama prefecture) have only recently started to develop a special distribution for organic produce.
[228] The *teikei* system was inspired by food co-ops and buying clubs that were already widespread in Japan. See Kondoh (2015) for details.
[229] Commercial (monoculture) organic farms usually rely on specialised traders.

Not everyone is as successful as Isomura san and Fuji san. 'Many I-turners around here tried to become organic farmers, but many of them failed and quit agriculture. More than farming, sales is the difficult part.'[230] Because organic farmers cannot count on JA, they tend to rely on family and friends in the early years of operations. Initially, this is perhaps unavoidable, but the inability to secure a large enough pool of customers easily becomes the primary cause of failure. For organic farmers, in particular, the site is an important element to consider. Eastern Nagano is well connected to Tokyo, but because local direct sales stores generally do not handle organic produce, parcel delivery is the only reliable marketing option.[231] Farms established near major cities can, on the contrary, benefit from a large pool of customers and outlets.

Ōhara is a village just half an hour away from the centre of Kyoto city. It became popular among organic farmers thanks to its *chokubaijo* (direct sales store) and weekly farmers' market attracting numerous customers from the city.[232] Restaurants and greengrocers' owners, as well as many individual customers, visit Ōhara every day to purchase organic fresh food. Yamamoto san moved to Ōhara to establish his farm in 2008. 'I wouldn't have made it without the *chokubaijo*. The village is blessed with a brand name and easy access to market'. He does not use parcel delivery and sells 70% of his produce through the *chokubaijo* and the farmers' market. The remaining 30% goes to a greengrocer in Kyoto and a company in Tokyo supplying high-end department stores. Takada san as well started farming in Ōhara in 2008 and about 60% of his crop is sold through the *chokubaijo* and the farmers' market, while the rest is sold to restaurants and greengrocers in Kyoto. Both Yamamoto san and Tanaka san have to decline many requests they receive from companies trading in organic vegetables.

[230] Interview with Fuji san.
[231] Parcel delivery is becoming increasingly unviable due to rising shipping costs. In the past ten years, shipping costs for a vegetable box have increased by about 50%. They represent about 1/3rd of the price paid by customers for their purchase.
[232] The development of organic agriculture was initiated by a pioneer farmer, a doctorate student from Kyoto who actively tried to attract new settlers and trained many new farmers now living in the village.

Direct sales stores have attracted much attention in recent years as an example of local food practice benefiting both producers and consumers. Stores can be privately owned or managed by agricultural cooperatives and sell farmers' produce, typically charging a handling fee of 10-15%. Farmers consign an agreed amount of produce and must retrieve unsold merchandise within a couple of days. Pictures of producers are displayed on the walls together with a code that is also indicated on products' labels. Stores can vary in size and assortment. In Ueda city, a large JA *chobubaijo* built inside a supermarket gathers products from over 200 farmers. The shop is open six days a week, and people line up at the entrance before the opening. Together with well-packaged fresh food, it is possible to purchase processed products such as jams, juices, flours, pickles, cheese, miso paste, etc.

A *chokubaijo* in Ueda-shi.

There are good reasons for shopping at direct sales stores. Prices are lower than in supermarkets, and products are locally grown and always fresh. Despite undeniable benefits for consumers, many farmers choose not to sell their produce in direct sales stores because of the small volumes they can absorb and the opportunity cost of delivering small lots (and eventually retrieving

unsold produce) to stores more or less distant from the farm. Judging by the pictures on the walls, elderly farmers appear to be the main suppliers of *chokubaijo*. 'Old people don't mind going back and forth from the store. They like having their products sold with their name on it, and overall they can earn more than through JA consignment system, so it's a good way to sell some of their crop.'[233]

Evolving food distribution

While fruit farmers and polyculture organic farmers may rely on direct sales to a significant extent, commercial farms typically operating on a monoculture regime must secure market outlets capable of absorbing high volumes. For the sake of simplicity, these can be divided into distributors (JA, wholesalers, traders) and food-related companies known as '*jitsujūsha*' (supermarkets, food manufacturers, restaurant chains, etc.). Another key distinction further discussed below and partly overlapping with the above one is between spot-market transactions and agricultural contracts.[234] New entrants' choices concerning marketing are influenced by site and training environment, but the opposite is also true: new entrants may choose crop, site, and training based on their desired business-marketing model. For instance, Kyoto prefecture features an entry into a farming scheme called *jissen nōjo,* promoting agriculture in depopulated areas. Different districts allocate selected fields, choose what new farmers will grow among many *kyo-yasai* (Kyoto vegetables) usually focusing on one item, and the outlets through which produce will be sold (usually JA). According to the head of Kyoto prefecture agricultural promotion centre, new entrants participating in the scheme show higher success rates than those opting for independent training-marketing routes, but only about 15% of aspiring farmers choose it because of the low degree of freedom allowed. While the site determines the availability of different outlets (e.g. in some areas JA might be the only distributor available), the choice is also conditioned by the social network built during training. For

[233] Interview with JA Ueda Farm director.
[234] Partnership with *jitsujūsha* is exclusively based on contracts, while sales to distributors are largely based on spot transactions (agricultural cooperatives also offer contract-based arrangements to members. Details below.).

instance, if training takes place under a JA production group (*bukai*), one is more likely to become a member and market his produce accordingly.[235] On the other hand, if training takes place under a farmer partnering with a food manufacturer, the new entrant will likely take advantage of this opportunity when establishing her farm. Different options are not self-exclusive: farmers often rely on different distributors or buyers allowing, for instance, a combination of spot transactions and contract-based agreements.

Due to the centrality of agricultural cooperatives and wholesale markets in the Japanese agri-food industry, agricultural contracting (*keiyaku nōgyō* or *keiyaku saibai*) has not been particularly widespread until recently. The diffusion of agricultural contracts is typically the product of growing concentration in the food industry and, in particular, in food retailing (Katchova 2013). Large retailers like supermarkets and convenience stores compete based on price and non-price factors, such as quality, variety, and year-round supply. In order to compete more effectively, they establish centralised procurement centres, branding, private standards, and certification systems, shifting their procurement from wholesale markets to direct contracts with producers. For producers, the first obvious advantage of agricultural contracts is that middlemen commissions can be cut and, at least in principle, revenues can be increased. More importantly, contracts allow farmers to plan production and anticipate cash flow. For the sake of simplicity, agricultural contracts can be divided into marketing contracts and production contracts (Katchova 2013). While marketing contracts define price or price mechanism, quantities to be delivered, and shipment conditions, production contracts are one step closer to vertical integration and also specify production inputs, farming practices, etc. Depending on contract conditions, farmers are more or less restricted in their management choices but compared to sales on spot markets, they can reduce price risk and make more informed decisions when planning investments and production. At the same time, if quantities

[235] Often such conditions are more or less formally agreed upon before the beginning of training when it comes to production groups.

to be delivered or quality standards cannot be met, producers must secure the additional quantities on spot markets at an uncertain price.

'Contracts are dangerous.' an instructor at Nagano agricultural school told me. 'Extreme weather events intensify every year, and this increases risk, especially in open field vegetable production. If you cannot comply with contract conditions, you'll be in trouble, so it's best to keep what you sell through contracts below 30-40% of your production and give the rest to JA to hedge risk.'[236] Shimazaki san, the founder of Top River mentioned in Chapter 6, had a different opinion. 'Professional agriculture is based on contracts. That's how you plan production, investments, and enlarge scale. Here we sell 90% of our produce on a contract basis. We even established our own procurement based on contracts with JA and partner farmers to make sure to fulfil our commitments with customers. Risks related to weather exist regardless. If you plan things carefully and take appropriate measures, contract farming is more advantageous.' Agricultural contracting is a controversial topic, not only from an individual perspective but also for its political implications. With its pros and cons, contract farming has in fact jeopardised the prosperity of agricultural cooperatives. As core farmers increasingly turn to private deals with companies, cooperatives continue to lose members, turnover, and market power.

JA distribution

To better understand different routes to market, it is useful to summarise the functioning of the JA distribution system and its recent transformation based on the case of Nagano prefecture and JA Shinshū Ueda in particular. Cooperative sales have been traditionally based on the so-called consignment system under three principles: unconditional consignment (*mujoken itaku*), average sale (*heikin hanbai*), and joint calculations (*kyōdō keisan*) (Katsura 2014). Unconditional consignment means that members entrust (*itaku*) their produce to a cooperative that freely chooses a

[236] Interview with an instructor at Nagano agricultural school.

sales outlet (a wholesale market).[237] Average sale and joint calculations stipulate that lots of the same quality range consigned on a given day by different producers to a cooperative are sold in different wholesale markets at different prices and those producers are paid an average price. Produce on consignment is sold in wholesale markets either through auctions or based on auction prices. Payments are set within a week once the wholesaler has sold lots and the final (average) price has been calculated deducting handling fees. Farmers know the prevalent market price at the time of consignment and can freely choose the amount to sell.[238] They are exposed to price fluctuations, but can freely make financial, production, and marketing decisions.

'You can make lots of money selling vegetables through JA. My friend in Komoro grows lettuce and broccoli on 3ha and sells mostly through consignment,' an employee of JA Ueda Farm informed me. 'On good years he can reach a hundred million yen (£740,000) in revenues, but on bad years prices are so low that the crop is not even harvested. It's bad to put it this way, but usually you make money when other production areas are hit by extreme weather or blight and prices rise. Agriculture is a bit like gambling with the weather.'

As an alternative to consignment, cooperatives' members can choose to sell their produce based on JA contracts. These include market deals negotiated by wholesalers on behalf of JA (*aitai torihiki*) and contracts stipulated directly by cooperatives with buyers (falling under the label of '*chokuhan'*).[239] Unlike the consignment system, price (or price mechanism), volumes, and quality standards are decided beforehand. For producers, these arrangements are similar to agricultural

[237] Produce can be consigned to JA in two ways. One is to put harvested produce in plastic containers and bring it to a sorting-shipment centre where it will be sorted and packaged. The other is to sort the produce individually, bundle it, put it into cardboard boxes, and bring it to a shipment centre. Criteria for assessment are based on quality and weight. Quality is usually assessed manually based on colour, shape, surface, etc. A major complaint of JA members (mostly commercial farmers) has to do with the grading of produce (thus the price paid) and the fact that it does not accurately-enough reflect differences in quality between different members' produce. Farmers are proud of their products and would like to have their name-brand recognized. This is a primary reason many producers prefer agricultural contracts over JA distribution.

[238] Other examples of spot market transactions include those with traders and those directly with wholesalers.

[239] *Chokuhan* literally means direct sales (as previously mentioned, the same expression is used to indicated farmers' direct sales or farm gate sales). In the context of agricultural cooperatives' distribution, *chokuhan* includes contracts with buyers as well as *chokubaijo*-based sales.

contracts, with the advantage that wholesalers and cooperatives take care of negotiations, shipments, payments, etc., and the disadvantage that handling fees apply.

Wholesale market-based deals (*aitai torihiki*) are divided into two main types: seasonal and weekly. Weekly deals mostly concern large food retailers. Prices are set a week in advance, usually on Friday, and are based on current auction prices and seasonal prices. Seasonal deals are set before the season starts (*yoyaku aitai torihiki*), mostly with restaurant chains and food manufacturers. Since orders are relatively stable, it is easy for farmers to plan production. However, because these companies cannot easily raise the price of their products or menus, it is difficult to obtain price increases (prices are typically based on the average of the previous five years). Market-based deals have different pros and cos. The most evident problem is high handling fees: while JA takes a fixed commission of 3%, wholesalers charge an additional 8-12% depending on the product group.[240] Complaints also concern the way prices are negotiated by wholesalers. This occurs especially during seasons characterised by underproduction when produce of lower-ranking sold on consignment through auctions (M or S size) is paid a higher price than that sold through advance deals (typically centred around L size).[241] 'When farmers see auction prices listed in shipment centres, they complain about the way prices have been negotiated and start questioning the entire system.'[242]

Contracts between agricultural cooperatives and buyers (i.e. excluding wholesalers' mediation) have become increasingly common in recent years. Commercial farmers prefer these deals because revenues are in principle higher (wholesalers' commissions do not apply), and

[240] Commission rates were fixed based on operational rules of respective central wholesale markets as follows: 10% for vegetables, 8% for fruits, and 6% for marine products. Following a 2004 amendment of the Central Wholesale Market Act, a provision concerning the flexibility of the commission rates was added. To date, however, none of the fruit and vegetable wholesalers operating in central markets has changed in existing commission rates (NRI 2018b).
[241] During periods characterised by undersupply of a certain crop, volumes sold on consignment through auctions decrease drastically because it is used to fulfil contracts. Wholesalers constantly have to deal with opposite situations: when produce for auctions is most needed there's little available, on the contrary in good harvest seasons there's an oversupply of consignment produce. As a general trend, demand for fresh food is increasingly elastic to price increases and inelastic to price drops. In other words, while oversupply leads to a lowering of prices, undersupply does not lead to significant price increases. As a result, if the available amount of a certain product increases, it's difficult to find a buyer even if price drops.
[242] Interview with JA Ueda sales official.

production areas or groups can have their brand recognised. Production areas can greatly benefit from marketing their products outside of wholesale markets. For instance, with luxury products such as fruit, production areas can establish partnerships with department stores, improve their image, and achieve higher prices. On the other hand, establishing partnerships with large companies is difficult for many agricultural cooperatives. Success depends on several conditions (e.g. size or degree of crop specialisation, presence of established brands, etc.) and cooperatives' ability to establish an efficient sales division.

JA Nagano *Zen-nō*, the prefectural federation of JA in charge of marketing, attracted much attention from other prefectures and became a textbook case study of the benefits derived from planning and coordination at the prefectural level (Ishiai 2014). The system was enabled by the strong leadership exerted by Nagano *Zen-nō* and the implementation of planned production policy. The 'vegetable basic plan' (*yasai kihon keikaku*) was introduced in 1965 in order to avoid an oversupply of different crops. It included all vegetables until 1987, but since 1995 only covers five major products: Chinese cabbage, lettuce, sunny lettuce, leaf lettuce, and celery. Production volumes for these items are significant nationwide, and for a long time, the "vegetable basic plan" functioned as a price maker mechanism. By coordinating all JA units, Nagano *Zen-nō* could plan shipments to major wholesale markets and achieve higher prices.[243] *Zen-nō* and wholesalers continued to coordinate agricultural cooperatives during the harvest season to ensure that contracts were fulfilled (e.g. by compensating quantities if a shipment could not be completed). For a long time, the system brought great benefits to producers, but its implementation has now become increasingly unviable. Not only did it become difficult to plan production because farmers want to freely grow crops based on seasonality, but an increasing number of commercial farms also started to sell outside of JA circuit. Moreover, cooperatives gradually expanded direct sales (*chokuhan*), thus reducing volumes sold on wholesale markets under *Zen-nō* coordination. Finally, changes in

[243] This refers to advance market-based deals (*yoyaku aitai torihiki*) discussed above.

market composition eroded the ability of *Zen-nō* to secure high prices. 'Because of the increasing variety of sale deals, it has become difficult to read offer and demand and set advantageous prices. Wholesalers used to know everything and could always tell the right price, but things have changed.'[244]

Unlike other agricultural cooperatives in Nagano prefecture, JA Shinshū Ueda (hereafter JA Ueda) has a low level of specialisation, and production volumes for any given item are relatively low.[245] While specialised (thus typically wealthier) cooperatives in the prefecture (e.g. JA Yatsugatake and JA Nagano-shi) have rapidly expanded direct sales partnering with large food-related companies, JA Ueda still relies on wholesale markets to a great extent. Roughly 35% of production volume is sold on consignment, 35% based on negotiation deals, and 30% as direct sales.[246] Direct sales, however, are mostly represented by local direct sale stores (about 70%). 'Ten years ago, direct sales accounted for less than 10% of the total volume, but thanks to the growing number of *chokubaijo* we could expand them significantly. We have now reached our limit, so from now expansion of direct sales will have to come from contracts with companies.'[247] *Chokubaijo* sales are formally counted as *chokuhan* (direct sales), but, as previously mentioned, their expansion has little value for commercial farmers needing more substantial, reliable outlets. 'Professional farmers keep asking us to expand direct sales to food-related companies. We have to meet their requests if we want to avoid that farmers stop selling through JA.'[248] JA Ueda recently established new commercial partnerships: an internet provider purchasing apples and grapes used as gifts for clients, two schools in Tokyo purchasing fresh food for children's meals, a small supermarket chain in Hiroshima prefecture, etc. The cooperative is also trying to develop new branding strategies and strengthen the sale of local products such as Tōmi grape, Chōwa mushrooms, and Sanada red

[244] Interview with Professor Yano Izumi.
[245] Total production value in 2017 was 9 billion yen. Vegetable is the first group by value (2.9 billion yen), followed, by rice (1.4 billion yen), livestock (1.3 billion yen), and fruit (1.1 billion yen).
[246] Differences exist depending on different products. For instance, fruit is exclusively sold through consignment.
[247] Interview with JA Ueda sales official.
[248] Interview with JA Ueda sales official.

apples, a new apple brand created after the success of a samurai tv series filmed in Ueda city in 2017. While commercial farmers keep asking for an expansion of direct sales excluding wholesalers' mediation, for the director of JA Ueda Farm, the benefits of relying on wholesalers justify the costs involved. 'JA employees are inexperienced when it comes to sales. Wholesalers, on the contrary, are extremely knowledgeable about the market and always know what is going on on the demand and supply side. They have experience in negotiating with large buyers, and if you need extra produce to fulfil a contract, they take care of it.'[249] The sales official at JA Ueda had a similar opinion: 'Farmers want to cut wholesalers' commissions. I understand it, but I don't think they fully understand the value of what they pay for.'

Food wholesale markets

After describing JA distribution and its ongoing transformation through the cases of Nagano JA and Ueda JA, it is useful to describe the functioning of food wholesale markets to better understand the channels through which fresh food is sold and the choices available to new entrants. Food wholesale markets in Japan have a long history, of nearly a century, and are still integral to the basic infrastructure of perishable food distribution (Kidachi 2019; Maruyama and Hirogaki 2007; Izumi 2010). The Central Wholesale Market Law was enacted in 1923 to replace the then-dominant middleman-led wholesale system with a transparent, publicly controlled auction system. Among its basic principles, commodities had to be sold only through auction, auction houses (wholesalers) had to take produce exclusively on consignment charging fixed handling fees, and they could not refuse any given lot. *Oroshiuri gyōsha* is traduced with 'wholesaler', but the word has a very different connotation in the context of food distribution in Japan. Rather than traders profiting on margins, wholesalers are in principle agents earning on commissions. Their primary role is that of selling fresh food on behalf of producers and agricultural cooperatives. They also

[249] Interview with the director of JA Ueda Farm.

fulfil other fundamental functions, including the punctual collection and sorting of a large amount of produce from thousands of producers all over the country, and that of guaranteeing coordination and constant flow of information between buyers and production areas. Each market only has one or two large wholesaler companies per commodity group (vegetable, fruit, sea food) traditionally operating under strict rules. Purchase too used to be strictly regulated with only certified buyers and mid-wholesalers allowed to buy from wholesalers.[250] Mid-wholesalers (*naka-oroshiuri gyōsha*) have long acted as intermediaries between wholesalers and small businesses, but their role has drastically changed in the past thirty years. Their number has steadily declined, and their economic condition has worsened since the late 1980s with the disappearance of many speciality stores (mom-and-pop stores) and the expansion of supermarkets.[251]

In order to meet the demands of large food retailers, in 1971, the Central Wholesale Market Act was replaced by the Wholesale Market Act. The new Act formally introduced new forms of transaction adopted since the 1960s as exceptions: pre-auction sales (*sakidori*) and negotiation deals (*aitai torihiki*). Pre-auction sales allowed the collection of merchandise before auctions begin.[252] Supermarkets find it difficult to purchase and deliver produce between the end of auctions and the opening of stores in the morning, so *sakidori* enabled them and other wholesalers operating in outlying markets to collect certain quantities and grades of products outside of markets as soon as lots arrive. Negotiation deals are transactions settled by wholesalers outside of the auction system. As previously mentioned, deals can take place the day before lots are shipped, a few weeks in advance, or before the season start (the latter are called *yoyaku aitai torihiki* or *keiyaku torihiki*).

[250] Regulations were relaxed in 2004 (more below).

[251] Between 1976 and 2015, the number of speciality stores declined from over 66,000 to less than 20,000 (MAFF 2017c:31). With the drastic decline of their traditional customers, the role of mid-wholesalers has changed. In 2016 only 20.9% of fruit and vegetable handled by mid-wholesales operating in central wholesale markets went to general (small) food retailers (MAFF 2018b:41).

[252] Auctions are divided into fixed auctions (*kotei seri*) and moving auctions (*idō seri*). In fixed auctions, following preliminary inspection of the lot, at the ring of the bell mid-wholesalers and other buyers line up on stands in front of the auctioneer (the wholesaler). Buyers bid using hand signs until the lot is allocated. In moving auctions, the auctioneer moves from lot to lot and buyers follow him until he steps on a footboard for the bidding start. In bidding sales (*nyūsatsu*) buyers write their bid on a piece of paper and pass it to the auctioneer. There are no further bids, and the lot goes to the higher bidder.

Negotiation deals gradually replaced auctions as the primary form of transaction in wholesale markets.[253] In 1980, 76.4% of fresh fruit and vegetable was sold through auctions, but in 2015 the share had declined to 10.4% (MAFF 2017c:26). This trend was already acknowledged in 1999 when a revision of the Act abolished the basic principle designating bids and auctions as the primary form of transaction in wholesale markets. A similar trend was seen in the Netherlands where, in 1990, more than 90% of all greenhouse vegetables, 78% of all fruit and 50% of all open field vegetables were sold through auctions. However, in the early 2000s, most fruits and vegetables were sold by way of contracting between growers and wholesalers or retailers, often supported by a special contract mediation agency (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003:98).

A successive amendment of the Act in 2004 introduced exemptions to other basic principles. Wholesalers were allowed to sell to third parties (*daisansha-hanbai*) besides authorised mid-wholesalers and buyers, and mid-wholesalers were allowed to purchase directly from producers (*jika-nibiki*). As a result, the distinction of roles between wholesalers and mid-wholesalers became blurred, and their relationship changed from a vertical one into a competitive one. Moreover, the resale of products (*kaitsuke-shuka*) by wholesalers first introduced as an exception in 1971 was formally recognised, shifting wholesalers' role toward that of traders. Finally, the 2004 reform allowed some transactions to take place without physically passing through the market (*sho-butsu-bunri*). As production areas progressively increased their sorting and packing capacity, the sorting function traditionally fulfilled by wholesalers became less critical for standardised products.[254]

Despite reforms undertaken in order to keep up with the changing environment, the volume and value of food distributed through wholesale markets have steadily decreased, notably due to lowering production and consumption of fresh food and the diffusion of agricultural contracts,

[253] Between 1980 and 2015 the ratio of produce on consignment handled by wholesalers decreased from 83.7% to 61.3% (Ab:26).

[254] With the increase of lots shipped in the night, more and more produce is delivered without being checked by anyone. Claims by buyers are common, but they often come a few days after the delivery, so it becomes difficult to identify passages and responsibilities. This rarely happened when everything had to pass through wholesalers' inspection.

including those negotiated directly by agricultural cooperatives. Less cooking at home vis-à-vis more eating out and growing consumption of ready-made meals led to a decline of the share of fresh food in total food consumption, from 28.4% to 16.3% between 1980 and 2015 (MAFF 2017c:27). While the demand for fresh food decreased, successive trade liberalisations allowed restaurant chains and food manufacturers to turn on imports for their procurement. Between 2002 and 2016, the turnover of central wholesale markets decreased from 5,190 to 4,016 million yen, while that of local wholesale markets decreased from 3,847 to 3,247 million yen (MAFF 2018b:32).[255] The volume of fruit and vegetable declined from 10.5 million tons in 1998 to 7.5 million tons in 2016 (MAFF 2018b:36). Although 84.4% of fresh fruit and vegetable (almost entirely domestically produced) are still sold through wholesale markets, when including imported fruit (mostly absorbed by the processing industry) the share fell from 82.7% in 1988 to 57.5% in 2015 (MAFF 2017c:34). The number of wholesalers and mid-wholesalers has also shrunk, respectively from 267 to166 and from 6,474 to 3,278 between 1980 and 2015 (MAFF 2017c:26). In the same period, the number of central and local wholesale markets declined from 89 to 64 and from 1,726 to 1,060, respectively.[256] Local wholesale markets and central wholesale markets in regional Japan, in particular, are under growing pressure because of the declining rural population, insufficient financing,[257] and growing dependence on central markets in metropolitan areas. With the expansion of production areas and agricultural cooperatives through mergers, large shipments came to be increasingly concentrated in major metropolitan markets and then transferred to markets in local areas (NRI 2018b:9). [258] Out of the 64 central wholesale markets currently operating in 40

[255] Local wholesale markets can be established by public bodies, private organizations, or semi-public corporations. The local government of a city with a population of more than 200,000 is exclusively entitled to establish a central wholesale market.

[256] Notably, while the number of local wholesale markets managed by private organizations declined remarkably, that of local markets established by public authorities has not (NRI 2018b:9).

[257] Cold-chain systems have become increasingly important for the distribution of perishable food, but such infrastructure is expensive, and many markets do not have sufficient funds for investments.

[258] Agricultural cooperatives are the main suppliers of perishable food to wholesale markets. The total number of collection and shipment organizations of horticultural products shrunk from 4,951 in 1991 to 1,470 in 2006 due to large-scale mergers of agricultural cooperatives. At the same time, the average annual shipment per organization increased by 2.7 times from 1,467 tons to 3,950 tons in the same period (NRI 2018b:12).

cities (of which 49 are handling fresh fruit and vegetable), Tokyo has eleven while Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, and Fukuoka each have three. Wholesale markets in metropolitan areas have thus become price makers as well as main distribution hubs connecting production areas and local markets.

The Ota Market in Tokyo, one of the largest wholesale markets for fresh produce.

The Wholesale Market Act was amended again in 2018. Three basic principles for which exceptions were allowed in 2004 were abolished entirely: the principle prohibiting wholesalers from selling to anyone other than authorised mid-wholesalers and buyers; the principle prohibiting mid-wholesalers from buying from anyone other than wholesalers; and the principle prescribing that produce must physically pass through the market. The amendment also gave greater freedom to individual markets and facilitated their privatisation (Fujishima 2017). The reform drew much criticism as it formally dismantled the traditional structure of the market and the role of wholesalers. Ano (2017) points out that reasons provided to justify the reform were based on false premises, such as that the necessity of a fair distribution function in an era of food shortage has decreased and the wholesale market has become just one among many other distribution points.

Both the Central Wholesale Market Act of 1923 and the Wholesale Market Act of 1971 were not introduced to address the problem of the fair distribution of fresh food in times of food shortage, but prominently in order to ensure an equitable and transparent price formation mechanism. As for the wholesale market being just one among many other distribution hubs, Ano (2017) argues that this is true only if considering the physical aspect of distribution. However, distribution also means the flow of capital and information. As the MAFF states, wholesale market key functions include the collection and sorting of produce, the formation of prices, the settlement of payments, and the transmission of information.

Another reason provided for the necessity of the reform was the urgency to achieve greater rationalisation of distribution and the promotion of direct sales. According to Fujishima (2017), the idea that commodity chains should be shortened, and intermediaries removed is not new, but it has been repeatedly proven too simplistic.[259] He argues that the importance of intermediaries in food distribution, and the key role played by wholesale markets, are not understood by most people. There are high costs involved in distribution, and although many people think that intermediaries are profiting by simply exploiting their position, wholesalers and mid-wholesalers are seeing lower profits every year (Nōgyō Shinbun 23 August 2018).[260] Even shortening the chain, remaining actors (producers, agricultural cooperatives, retailers) will still have to carry out tasks previously performed by intermediaries at similar, if not higher, costs. Contrarily to the idea that shortening the supply chain would reduce costs, an important function of wholesale markets is precisely that of reducing the number of transactions, in principle reducing total distribution and transaction costs.[261] Thanks to wholesale markets, everyday buyers can rest assured that they can find fresh food

[259] A significant strand in the foundation literature on wholesaling was a debate on the nature and types of costs of wholesaling. From the nineteenth century onwards but particularly between the 1930s and 1960s in both North America and Europe, wholesalers found themselves having to justify their existence (Dawson 2017).
[260] In 2018, 35% of fruit-vegetable wholesalers incurred in profit loss (Nōgyō Shinbun 23 August 2018).
[261] Considering a simplified model with three producers and three retailers, if each producer sells to each retailer the total amount of transactions is nine, but if there is an intermediary the total amount of transactions is reduced to six. Without an intermediary, each producer has to conduct three different negotiations and organise three different shipments, ultimately incurring in higher shipment and transaction costs.

collected and sorted promptly from all over the country. Similarly, producers can be confident that they will be able to sell their crops and be paid in a timely fashion based on a fair price mechanism. Likewise, consumers can count on the price of food on the shelf closely reflecting its quality. The reason why many contracts still pass through the market is that, by their nature, fruit and vegetable are subject to quantity and quality fluctuation and, for many products, even for supermarket chains, it would be difficult or uneconomical to establish independent supply lines (e.g. for products such as fruit only available in small amounts, from scattered producers, at unpredictable times). Wholesale markets thus fulfil roles of quality control and accumulation that supermarkets procurement divisions or agricultural cooperatives can hardly ensure.

Price formation and market power

We tend to take for granted that commodity prices are determined by aggregate demand and supply. Not only is the idea of prices simply emerging from an impersonal market mechanism unrealistic, but one often wonders where supply and demand for a given commodity can exactly be found and measured. Aggregate supply and demand result from the interaction of a multitude of actors via private transactions, so, unlike textbook models, they cannot be easily traced. Physical markets represent a partial exception: unlike abstract markets, the large number of sellers and buyers gathering in one place allows in fact supply and demand to materialise and meet. This is especially true for wholesale markets because of the limited number of products being traded and the fact that both buyers and sellers are highly knowledgeable about them. This ensures that prices are competitively assessed and that they reflect the actual value of produce. The scope of wholesale markets in fresh food distribution in Japan is such that the abstract market for fruit and vegetable and the wholesale market largely overlap. In other words, the market *is* the wholesale market. It is

no coincidence that the word for abstract market (*shijō*) is used instead of the word for marketplace (*ichiba*) when referring to fresh food wholesale markets.[262]

Japan's wholesale market is an open, public system. This openness became its symbol, and auctions its foundational principle. Auctions have long been considered the best system for transparency and equity, but became increasingly unsuitable for modern food distribution. In Japan as elsewhere, this is largely the consequence of growing market concentration in food retail. The reasons are well summarised by Bijman and Hendrikse (2003:100) in discussing the decline of auctions in the Netherlands. First, when buyers become too big to purchase all their products in one auction, they have to send agents to several regional auctions, which leads to high purchasing costs. Second, a buyer that wants to purchase a large quantity of the same product becomes his own competitor. Third, large retailers prefer stable prices, which the auction cannot guarantee. Fourth, auctions make it difficult to negotiate customer-specific demands with producers. Other disadvantages potentially include high logistic costs derived from the need to transport produce to the auction, lack of incentives for growers to improve quality beyond the requirements of a particular quality class, and dissatisfaction among some growers due to insufficient differentiation in auction tariffs reflecting differences in quality.

As previously mentioned, the volume of fresh food sold through auctions has drastically declined in Japan as elsewhere. As long as some auctions continue to take place, spot markets can still fulfil the function of setting a price standard for other deals. However, the risk is that too few transactions will take place for them to continue functioning when in a certain area or for a specific commodity when there is a limited number of buyers (Katchova 2013:183). As supermarket procurement officers internalise more and more transactions, price formations become opaque, and concerns arise relative to the likely exclusion of disadvantaged suppliers from these arrangements and the shift in market power toward a few, large buyers (Timmer 2014:26).

[262] The pair of characters 市場 reads as *shijō* or *ichiba*.

Buyer power has been defined as '...the situation which exists when a firm or a group of firms, either because it has a dominant position as a purchaser of a product or a service or because it has strategic or leverage advantages as a result of its size or other characteristics, is able to obtain from a supplier more favourable terms than those available to other buyers' (OECD 1981:134). There are many ways in which buyer power may occur, as expressed in specific contractual terms between participants at each stage of the supply chain. Examples include de-listing (or threat of de-listing) of suppliers, slotting fees, forced discounts, retrospective payments, late payments, retrospective changes to contracts, etc. (OECD 2013a:25). Other practices adopted by supermarkets include forcing suppliers to pay for the right to stock supermarket's shelves, demanding compensation from suppliers if profits from the sales of items are less than anticipated, and requiring suppliers to re-purchase unsold items (Lawrence and Dixon 2015:219). A well-researched example of abuse of market power is for instance that of Wal-Mart and its suppliers, continually forced to lower their prices and rely on increasingly controversial labour and environmental practices (e.g. Moreton 2009; Lichtenstein 2005).

Market concentration in food retailing continues apace.[263] Throughout the world, the top five supermarkets in most countries exhibit extraordinarily high levels of concentration. In Australia, they control 99% of sales, in Sweden 91%, Ireland 83%, France and the UK 71% (Carolan 2013:112). Exercise of buyer power in the food industry is common, and the magnitude of the phenomenon is likely underestimated as only a minority of cases surface because of risks of de-listing for suppliers filing a complaint. Moreover, it is not easy to determine whether a trading price is decided as a result of abuse of superior bargaining position, for instance, to distinguish between price discrimination based on reasonable grounds such as volume discount and price discrimination violating existing legislation. Exercise of buyer power is usually associated with oligopsony and high concentration ratio, but unbalanced bargaining position is a sufficient condition for it (Chen

[263] Market concentration is usually calculated as the ratio of a given market occupied by the sum of the top four or five companies.

2008; Domina and Taylor 2009; Foer 2010;).[264] This is the case in Italy, where market concentration in food retail is low compared to most industrialised countries, but the exercise of buyer power in the food industry is often reported by media.[265]

Another consequence of the exercise of buyer power is the so-called waterbed effect, whereby a rise in purchasing expenses is borne by small retailers when large retailers exercising their buyer power can purchase products at a low price from suppliers (OECD 2013a:259). It occurs as suppliers have to compensate for losses arising from the sale of products at a low price to large retailers. That is, suppliers have no choice but to raise the price for products supplied to other retailers. Concern springing from growing market concentration in food retail is exacerbated by how supermarkets wield massive power over suppliers through the adoption of private standards. Food quality and safety standards traditionally set and enforced by state authorities become increasingly stringent under the governance of supermarkets seeking to improve quality for consumers and gain increased control over food chains (Lawrence and Dixon 2015; Bruch et al. 2013; Clapp and Fuchs 2009). Davey and Richards (2013) discuss, for instance, the diffusion of 'audit cultures' that come with private standards creating an economic burden for suppliers. The race to the bottom triggered by extreme price-based competition among large retailers affects producers, agricultural labourers, and the environment. Consumers are the only apparent winners of this downward spiral, although the social cost of ever-lowering prices should take into account the numerous externalities involved.[266]

Risks associated with the exercise of market power can be reduced through state regulation. Two types of regulation exist in Japan under the Antimonopoly Act to address the vertical issue of

[264] Buyer power should not be considered as the mirror image of seller power (e.g. oligopoly). Foer (2010) shows, for instance, that while seller power takes effect in very highly concentrated markets, buyer power can be exhibited in relatively unconcentrated markets (In Harvey et al. 2013:105).
[265] E.g. Ilfattoquotidiano.it 27 September 2018; Ilfattoquotidiano.it 25 December 2018.
[266] These include the all the consequences of the progressive disappearance of smallholdings and growing concentration in agriculture discussed in Chapter 6 (e.g. loss of biodiversity and local knowledge, growing dependency on seasonal cheap foreign labour in food production, growing dependency of the real economy on the financial economy, etc.)

buying power against suppliers*:* regulation on abuse of superior bargaining position and regulation ensuring fair trade between subcontractors and contracting companies (OECD 2013a:254). Regulations on abuse of superior bargaining position are different from those on abuse of a dominant position in the market. That is to say, it is not required that a party has a market-dominant position or a dominant bargaining position. It is sufficient for it to have a relatively superior bargaining position as compared to the other transacting party.[267] Two recent cases in which legal actions were taken against abuse of superior bargaining position were that against Sanyo Marunaka K.K. in 2011 and that against Ralse Co., Ltd in 2013 (ibid). Japan Fair Trade Commission (JFTC) published several reports on large-scale retailers suspected to engage in acts of abuse of superior bargaining position (e.g. JFTC 2013) and in 2010 published a report on the existence of waterbed effect in food retail.[268]

State regulation may not be effective in limiting the exercise of market power. A more effective way for producers to avoid being subjected to buyer power has long been to establish a bargaining cooperative for the collective sale of farm products and obtain countervailing power vis-à-vis large processors and retailers. Asymmetric market power (both upstream and downstream farm) is indeed a common reason for establishing a cooperative (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003). So-called 'countervailing power' can, however, easily turn into superior market power. This is the case in Japan, where, more than problems associated with monopsony, the power wielded by agricultural

[267] In determining the presence or absence of a superior bargaining position, the degree of dependence by Party B (inferior bargaining position) on the transactions with Party A (superior bargaining position), position of Party A in the market, the possibility of Party B changing its business counterpart, and other concrete facts indicating the need for Party B to carry out transactions with Party A are comprehensively considered. Abuses of superior bargaining position are categorised into: (1) forcing Party B to purchase goods or services other than the one pertaining to the said transactions, (2) request for payment of monetary contribution, etc., (3) request for dispatch of employees, etc., (4) request for provision of other economic benefits (For instance, patents and other intellectual property rights), (5) refusal to receive goods pertaining to the transactions, (6) return of such goods, (7) delay in payment, (8) price reduction, and (9) other establishments, etc. of trade terms in a way disadvantageous to Party B. In addition to the existing measure of cease and desist order against abuse of superior bargaining position, surcharge payment order was introduced into the Antimonopoly Act in 2010 (OECD 2013a:254-259).

[268] The report was based on the results of a questionnaire submitted to food manufacturers and wholesalers on their sales prices to large-scale supermarkets vis-a-vis small-scale retailers. Responses from a wholesaler suggested that he had no choice but to engage in price discrimination and raise prices applicable to some small-scale general retail stores as it was forced to meet demands from large-scale supermarkets for discounts not agreed upon under contracts (JFTC 2013).

cooperatives has often led to anti-competitive behaviour on producers' side. As previously discussed, powerful prefectural federations such as Nagano Zen-nō have actively used their superior bargaining position to achieve higher prices and better conditions on wholesale markets. Prefectural federations also coordinate (collude) to control production and avoid concentrating shipments in the same period in order to raise prices as discussed in Chapter 5. Despite these and other examples of anti-competitive behaviour, it must be emphasised that agricultural cooperatives, production areas, and production groups do compete.[269] Agricultural cooperatives can, in some cases, achieve a high market share for certain commodities, but their overall market power is not comparable to that of major food retailers.

Conclusions

Similar to other countries, direct sales represent a marketing strategy often adopted by new entry farmers in order to raise profit margins. However, as shown in the first part of the chapter, not only does the success of business models centred on direct sales depend on marketing skills and farm location, but only fruit farmers and polyculture vegetable farmers can benefit from such business models. At the same time, the majority of new entrants continue to depend on major distribution channels. As widely discussed in previous literature, so-called alternative food networks represent by and large a market niche (e.g. Kneafsey et al. 2008; Goodman et al. 2012:189). Without diminishing the role and value of 'alternative' forms of food provisioning, it has been pointed out that peasant agriculture and short food supply chains cannot replace industrial agriculture and large-scale distribution, especially given the growing global demand for food (Bernstein 2014).

While alternative food networks have recently received much attention in anthropology, sociology, and geography, different configurations of 'conventional' food distribution have enjoyed

[269] Lack of competition in Japanese agriculture often springs from regulations rather than from cartel-like behaviour among cooperatives. See, for instance, Hansen (2014) for examples in the dairy industry.

much less consideration. Popular concepts such as ‘corporate food regime’ (McMichael 2009) and ‘food empire’ (Van der Ploeg 2008) have arguably contributed to obscure significant differences characterising agri-food systems in capitalist economies. Similar to processes of agrarian change discussed in Chapter 6, food distribution in Japan provides an example of a peculiar path of capitalist development as conceptualized in food regime analysis, which has sought to explain the role of agriculture as a key area of accumulation in the development of the capitalist world economy and the trajectory of the state system (Friedmann and McMichael 1989; Bernstein 2016). As Wilkinson and Goodman (2019) point out, the homogenising framework of ‘regimes’ and hegemonic strategy often fails to recognize alternative developmental trajectories and highly differentiated institutional landscapes. Japan has been largely neglected in agri-food systems literature to date. However, several features of fresh food distribution in the country are highly relevant to the political economy of agri-food. Unlike other industrialised countries, this chapter showed that the diffusion of agricultural cooperatives encompassing the majority of producers nationwide and the centrality of wholesale markets in fresh food distribution guarantee greater transparency in price formation and countervailing market power vis-à-vis large food retailers.

The agricultural industry is often indicated as the best example of near-perfect competition (Sykuta 2013), but this only takes into account its horizontal dimension. As vertical markets, food chains are highly distorted. The food system is sometimes described as an hourglass, with thousands of farmers selling their produce to millions of consumers via a small number of corporate food processors and retailers (Corporate Watch 2010). The bottleneck also exists upstream farm as a result of high concentrations is the chemicals and seed industry. Producers are usually the weakest link of food chains, squeezed between large, multinational companies. The restructuring of food chains operated by large food retailers, in particular, has led to a situation whereby small farmers are increasingly marginalised or driven out of business (McMichael and Friedmann 2007; Young 2012).

Perfect competition rarely exists outside of theoretical models. Contrarily to what is often argued in its defence, a market system is not an impersonal, neutral formation. Markets are shaped by, and expression of, power relations. As any other political realm, markets are characterised by an ever-shifting balance of power, and like any other distribution mechanisms, can benefit/damage certain actors or sections of society over others. This is especially true when so-called market distortions strip the market mechanism of its 'Pareto optimum' leading to inefficiencies. While economic theory recognises the role of power and social networks in price formation in 'distorted markets' (e.g. monopolies and oligopolies), it still postulates prices as the result of aggregate supply and demand in its models. For Lines (2006), the removal of the notion of market power from the underlying theory of economics possibly represents the greatest weakness of its entire theoretical edifice. Relying on the concept of perfect competition, since the late 19th-century, 'mainstream economics has seemed to eschew the notion that market power could be at all fundamental, regarding it as more of a special case which the basic theory of the perfectly competitive market can ignore' (Lines 2006:2).

The role of social and political forces in price formation was already highlighted by Durkheim (1947, 1992), who described prices as social facts emerging from social norms. Weber (1978:108) too rejected the view that prices can be merely understood as the product of market mechanism and saw them instead as 'the product of conflicts of interest and of compromises; they thus result from power constellations.' In a similar vein, for Bourdieu (2005:77) 'the structure of the relations of force among firms, which do not just interact indirectly, by way of prices, contributes, in most essential respects, to determining prices by determining, through the position occupied within this structure, the differential chances of influencing price formation […]. It is not prices that determine everything, but everything that determines prices.' Recent anthropological theories of price have been concerned with the composition of prices, in an effort to reveal its socio-cultural aspects (Ballestero 2015; Besky 2016; Guyer 2009). This line of inquiry follows the way opened by Marx and Polanyi. They drew attention to the effacement of the politics and conflicts that lie behind the

formation of prices and their cultural justification (Luetchford and Orlando 2019). As Guyer (2009:204) writes, '[t]he concealment of composition [is] one of the main functions of price ideologies, since it dampens reasonable doubt about worth and circumvents the moral and political commentary that might ensue from close analysis.'

The market mechanism has long been criticised for its effects on social life, but on what basis might *a* price be deemed acceptable or just remains open to debate (Luetchford and Orlando 2019). Morality or customary practice are commonly adopted criteria in all societies, but their contextual and mutable nature does not exert the same appeal of universal theories of value. Together with exchange value, labour value represents another universal criterion to set prices. For Marx, a just price reflects 'the amount of labour invested in a given object as a specific *proportion* of the total amount of labour in the system as a whole' (Graeber, 2001:55). Because of well-known difficulties in converting labour values into market prices (e.g. variation in the composition of capital or the ratio of labour to equipment), however, Gudeman (2008:72) suggests that a labour theory of value 'provides a critical perspective on what ought to be rather than what is. The metric of labour value provides a moral analysis, against which actual markets can be measured.'

Problems springing from the adoption of the price mechanism have been largely documented by anthropologists discussing theories of value and the moral economy, but, outside of the discipline of economics, markets are seldom considered in terms of their departure from equilibrium models of perfect competition. Perfect competition is an abstraction hardly found in the real world, yet markets (both horizontal and vertical) can display to a greater or lesser degree features found in the theoretical model.[270] This is not a trivial matter: while perfect competition still carries a principle of justice, markets characterised by asymmetric power relations can undermine free and fair competition. So-called market distortions can significantly affect the dynamics of price formation. However, little attention has been paid in economic anthropology or economic sociology

[270] A large number of buyers and sellers, perfect information, homogeneous products, no barriers to entry or exit, no externalities, no transaction costs, etc.

to the role of institutions in fostering fair competition and to the strategies adopted by economic actors in the attempt to balance asymmetric power relations (Gordon 2010; Beckert 2011; Luetchford and Orlando 2019).[271]

To be sure, what constitutes adequate and fair competition largely depends on the theoretical perspective one takes. As Harvey (2013:6) points out, not all economists accept the neoclassical framework centered on the equilibrium model of perfect competition.[272] Notwithstanding theoretical disagreement, growing market concentration and highly asymmetric power relations characterising food chains all over the world are too far removed from what most people (and possibly most economists) would consider adequate and fair competition. The tendency under capitalism toward growing concentration was already indicated by Marx and Weber and is today evident in the agri-food sector. State regulation can theoretically correct market distortions or prevent their detrimental effects, but this is easier said than done as giant transnational food corporations use political clout that comes with economic power to influence legislation and courts (Taylor 2013).

The case of Japan's fresh food distribution provides a valuable example of institutions guaranteeing transparency of price formation and forms of cooperation ameliorating issues of asymmetric market power. Industrialised countries saw a hollowing out of their wholesale market along with the expansion of large food retailers. Japan's food retail is still characterised by a relatively low degree of concentration and its wholesale market, albeit declining and changing its character, is still in good shape when compared to most countries.[273] This has to do both with the

[271] Ethnographic studies on bargaining in physical markets (e.g. Alexander 1987; Clark 1994) tell us little about price formation in commodity markets. Commodity chain studies (e.g. Fabinyi 2013) seek to explore the distribution of benefits along the chain but often lack comparative breadth and typically miss out dynamics of price formation as price negotiations can be hardly be documented. Studies analysing how prices are regulated by authorities (see Dinler 2019) describe ways in which the market mechanism is suspended rather than preserved.

[272] An Austrian economics perspective emphasises, for instance, the process by which competition occurs and not necessarily static indicators on market concentration or monopolisation. A Shumpeterian approach distinguishes between competition within a market and competition between markets, the latter being the one to worry about. A Marxian perspective focuses instead on the goal of a firm to grow and control resources, with emphasis placed on the size of the firms, not necessarily on their number in a particular industry (Harvey 2013:6).

[273] In Japan, 84% of total volume share of fruit and vegetable passes through wholesale markets, as compared to Italy (50%), France (31%), Spain (28%), the Netherlands (20%), UK (15%), Germany (11%) (Freshplaza.it 3 December 2019)

character of Japanese food culture (attention to freshness, quality, seasonality, appearance) and with the strong ties between agricultural cooperatives and wholesalers. Perhaps the quest for more equitable food provisioning needs not necessarily resort to what Bernstein (2016) dubs ‘peasant populism,' but can find in Japan’s ‘mainstream’ distribution a valuable model. At the same time, Japan’s agri-food system is transforming rapidly under the pressure of market forces and political reforms (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016; Sekine and Bonanno 2016; Jentzsch 2016), possibly suggesting global convergence. The diffusion of agricultural contracts, the expansion of cooperatives sales outside of markets, and deregulations of wholesale markets will lead to growing risks associated with the exercise of buyer power, but, as long as agricultural cooperatives survive, producers will arguably preserve countervailing market power.

The analysis of food distribution in Japan presented in this chapter demonstrated that, when compared to their counterparts in other industrialised countries, Japanese new entry farmers benefit from a favourable distribution system preventing the marginalisation of smallholdings. Moreover, new agricultural entrants face today a more diversified market and can take advantage of numerous marketing opportunities beyond mainstream distribution. Alternative marketing strategies can prove unsuccessful for some people, but their feasibility ultimately depends on new farmers’ ability to assess, plan, and implement them. Overall, access to market outlets appears not to be a significant element accounting for widespread difficulties in securing livelihood from agriculture among new entrants.

Conclusions

The empirical question driving this research was why, despite high levels of support and protection, so many new entry farmers from a non-farming background fail to secure sufficient income to live on from their activity. Through the case of agricultural new entrants, this study explored the rise of pro-rural migration in Japan and difficulties faced by new settlers in securing livelihoods and desired lifestyles in the countryside. Based on ethnographic work mostly centred on fruit farmers in eastern Nagano prefecture, this study interrogated the possibilities of agriculture-based modes of livelihood in Japan by focussing on the main hurdles involved in establishing a farming business.

Difficulties faced by new entry farmers are context-specific, but also revealing of the complexities of Japanese agriculture at large. New entry farmers look with fresh eyes at agricultural issues, and their experiences provided a unique vantage point over land issues, rural forms of organisation, the reproduction of farming knowledge, and food distribution. Through ethnographic material complemented by institutional analysis, this study documented pressing issues confronting regional Japan and Japan's agri-food system. In the attempt to contextualise Japan's case within a broader framework and reconsider debates on deagrarianisation and food supply chains in other capitalist economies through a broad political economy approach, this study considered specific features of Japan's agri-food system in comparison to EU countries and Italy in particular.

This chapter first presents conclusions on new entry in agriculture, pro-rural migration, and rural revitalisation in Japan. The chapter then advances propositions on Japanese agriculture and broader trends of agrarian change.

New entry in agriculture

Since the early 2010s, the growing trend of new entry in agriculture by individuals from a non-farming background significantly contributed to the recent rise of pro-rural migration in Japan.

Their case appears particularly relevant as agriculture, despite its low economic significance, remains central to rural life and rural revitalisation in Japan. Previous studies have largely focussed on successful stories of municipalities attracting new entrants and on new farmers' background and motives,[274] while paying little attention to the specific context in which they come to operate, the opportunities available to them, and the reasons behind their choices.[275] This is also true for much research on new agricultural entrants even beyond Japan. As Wilbur (2013:167) points out, 'whereas the impulses that motivate back-to-the-land migration have guided much of the research on the subject, the everyday practices that enable new farmers to achieve their ambitions have received much less attention.'

Why do so many new entry farmers from city struggle to earn a living from agriculture, a protected industry in Japan? This study attempted to answer this question by exploring the key hurdles faced by new entrants in starting a farming business: securing land and housing, farming skills, capital, and market outlets.

Contrary to my initial expectations, difficulties in accessing farmland appear not to be a key factor accounting for low income levels among new entrants. All over the country, farmland for lease has become increasingly available and cheap as a consequence of depopulation. As discussed in Chapter 4, new entrants might not be able to access large, consolidated fields from the beginning, but they can easily increase cultivated area as they establish trust in the community. A notable exception is organic farmers, who may face discrimination and only be able to access marginal lots. Although access to farmland is not a significant issue in rural areas like eastern Nagano prefecture, the situation is different near metropolitan areas, as mentioned in the case of Ōhara and Kameoka, a village and a small town near Kyoto city. As discussed in Chapter 7, proximity to major cities means better access to market outlets, making farm site a key factor, especially for business models

[274] E.g. Takano et al. 2015; Shigiya et al. 2017; Izumi 2018. Short studies broadly discussing difficulties faced by new entrants include Aikawa 2017; Egawa 2016a; Egawa 2016b; Ogasawara 2016; Ogasawara and Kusano 2013, 2014; Shima 2013a; Shima 2013b; Hashimoto and Hu 2016; Uchiyama 2014. This literature was discussed in Chapter 3.
[275] The same is true for previous studies in English, all focusing on organic farmers (Rosenberger 2014, 2017; Kurochkina 2015; McGreevy 2012; Zollet 2018; McGreevy et al. 2019).

centred around direct sales. At the same time, farms managed by new entrants can be profitable regardless of their location, so farm site should be considered as a variable limiting one's business model rather than an obstacle per se. More than farmland access, land fragmentation can limit efficiency and, in turn, farm profitability. On the other hand, this is not a significant factor in the early years of farm management, when total farmed area tends to be limited and risk rather comes from a too-rapid expansion. Moreover, popular crops such as vegetable and fruit can be profitably farmed even on small lots. More than accessing farmland, accessing detached houses for rent seems to be one of the greatest challenges faced by new rural settlers and new farmers in particular. Housing is not, strictly speaking, an agricultural matter, but because new entrants need parking, storage, and shipping space near the fields, difficulties in securing a homestead can significantly affect farm operations as well.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the acquisition of farming skills is one of the most significant aspects influencing the profitability of the farms ran by new entrants. Not only are new farmers inexperienced and unable to cope well with new situations, but they are typically slow and inefficient. Some people expand farmed area too quickly and end up being unable to look after the crops properly. As one participant put it, everyone can grow some veggies, but only experienced farmers know how to grow high-quality products in large quantity. Differences based on crop and marketing model can be significant. For instance, unlike fruit, vegetable is grown several times in a year, allowing new entrants to experience the cultivation cycle more frequently and limit losses from crop failures. Marketing models centred around direct sales allow new entrants to make up for their limited farming skills by producing less and selling at a higher unit price. Acquiring farming skills takes time, but, compared to their counterparts in other countries, aspiring farmers in Japan can benefit from countless training-counselling opportunities.

Capital constraints are clearly not a significant factor. As discussed in Chapter 6, Japanese new entry farmers benefit from generous financial support compared to their counterparts in Europe. Together with prefectural and municipal funds, aspiring farmers can access zero interest

loans up to ¥3.7million and income-supplementing subsidies for up to five years of farm management through a national scheme. Privileged economic status can facilitate the establishment of a farming enterprise, but even aspiring farmers without personal savings can make substantial investments and bear a few years of low revenues as long as they are willing to take risk.

Securing market outlets can be challenging, but overall Japan's market-distribution environment appears quite favourable for new entry farmers. Not only do Japanese farmers enjoy relatively high prices thanks to border and price policies discussed in Chapter 5, but they also benefit from the nationwide diffusion of agricultural cooperatives selling members' produce based on a transparent, punctual payment system. JA distribution might not be as profitable as other channels for some crops, but it is an option always available and a very convenient one, especially in the early years of farm management when produce is usually far from perfect and thus difficult to market otherwise. Problems typically arise when new entrants plan to market their produce directly but cannot secure a large-enough pool of customers. This seems to be a relatively common occurrence among organic farmers, who must rely entirely on direct sales because of lack of alternative distribution channels, in particular JA. Excluding organic produce, Japan's fresh food market-distribution environment appears very favourable to small producers. In this perspective, marketing-related problems have more to do with the business models adopted by new entrants than with actual obstacles.

Finally, perhaps the most significant factor accounting for low income levels among new entry farmers seems to be individual choices concerning farm size. As discussed in Chapter 6, many aspiring farmers do not plan to make agriculture their exclusive source of income, and this is also true for many recipients of the national support scheme on which statistics are based (NCA 2017). In principle, in order to be eligible for income-supplementing subsidies, new entrants must demonstrate that the farm will generate a minimum annual income of ¥2.5 million within five years from its establishment. However, local institutions responsible for the implementation of the scheme may flexibly interpret this and other requirements. The way the scheme is designed

removes the incentive to raise farm income and incentivises reliance on off-farm work and under-the-table payments. According to many officials in organisations related to new entry in agriculture, since the introduction of the national support scheme in 2011, many urbanites entered agriculture for lack of better options or simply because they wanted to experience life in the countryside, and many of them ended up living off subsidies. Regulation of the support scheme has now been tightened in order to prevent its potential misuse, and people without true resolve are nowadays persuaded to give up on their idea, but statistics likely reflect the fact that, in some cases, low agricultural income in the early years of farm management is the result of choice rather than of actual obstacles.

The analysis presented indicates that Japan's institutional environment is very conducive to agricultural-based modes of livelihood. Compared to their counterparts in EU countries, Japanese new entry farmers benefit from better financial support, counselling-training opportunities, market protection, distribution channels, and, increasingly, ease of farmland access. Although these elements significantly facilitate new entry, Japanese farmers are at the same time confronted with a number of challenges, most notably labour shortage, land fragmentation, and extreme weather. Whilst a relatively friendly environment for family farms, Japan is not particularly conducive to large-scale, entrepreneurial agriculture. Even for small-scale farmers, no matter how supported, starting a business remains a challenging endeavour. The path toward one's goal is not always straightforward: many aspiring wine makers at JA Ueda Farm are now growing broccoli to make a living while waiting for grape vines to become productive. More than business aspects involved in the establishment-management of a farm, the greatest challenge faced by new farmers from the city is arguably getting used to long working hours outdoors, physical fatigue, and lack of holidays. These add to general difficulties experienced by pro-rural migrants after their relocation, such as loneliness and burdensome interpersonal relations.

Pro-rural migration

Lifestyle aspects characterising the experience of pro-rural migration largely depend on place as well as on variables such as migrants' age, gender, economic status, marital status, etc. Young couples are usually in a better position than singles: they are more welcomed by the community, can access a number of services more easily (e.g. priority in *akiya* banks' waiting lists), and, in the case of new entry farmers, can sustain each other in farm operations. Economic status is undoubtedly a key variable. Aside from aspects related to business, being able to buy and reform a house rather than struggling to find one for rent can significantly affect the experience of relocation.

Pro-rural migration is a complex phenomenon. The diverse demographics, motives, and background of migrants, together with significant differences characterising rural regions and municipalities, make most generalisations redundant. From a macro perspective, it is possible to identify major push-pull factors accounting for the growing number of young urbanites relocating into the countryside in the early 2010s. The worsening of the Japanese economy following the financial crisis of 2008 certainly played a key role, suggesting a correlation between economic-employment conditions in cities and pro-rural migration.[276] The case of new agricultural entrants is emblematic: according to all officials I met in organisations related to new entry in agriculture, many more people were visiting agricultural fairs and consultation centres in the early 2010s than in the late 2010s. After a steady increase in the number of new entry farmers in the first half of the 2010s, statistics too show a declining trend, in concomitance with the progressive improvement of the Japanese economy (MAFF 2019a). The introduction of the new forms of financial support for new entrants in 2009 and 2011 certainly contributed to this trend, but the link with economic fluctuation remains evident. Aside from the specific case of agriculture and the macro-economic context, there is arguably a link between employment/employment conditions and individual considerations on the opportunity to start a new life in the countryside, as discussed in Chapter 2.

[276] A similar correlation was observed for instance in Italy (InTerris 27 November 2018).

Together with the decreasing pull of cities, the rise of counterurbanisation is also a consequence of increasing appeal exerted by 'the rural'. The last decade saw for the first time a surprising rebirth of the image of rurality among young urbanites. The '*inaka gurashi būmu*' (rural living fad) of the early 2010s is testified by the proliferation of books, magazines, manga, movies, and television programmes on farming and rural living (Osawa 2014). As with most social phenomena in media-dominated societies, it is difficult to overstate the role that the media played in fuelling pro-rural migration in creating a typical self-reinforcing, self-fulfilling loop. The Japanese countryside has been romanticised through all sorts of adverting campaigns in the recent past (Robertson 1998; Creighton 1997), but unlike images advertised by tourist agencies and commercials talking to a middle class in search for a break from city life to rediscover cultural heritage and enjoy leisure activities, the 'new rurality' envisages a permanent move and mobilises different tropes. Recurring scenes include the small *panyasan* (bread bakery), the refurbished, stylish *ryokan* (traditional inn), the book café built in a forest cabin, the fancy IT office facing the sea, etc. These images often combine urban and rural, modern and vintage. In a way, they bring the city into the countryside. As Traphagan (2020) points out, individuals and organizations create a new kind of rurality and rural lifestyle that blends imaginary, conceptual, and material aspects of rusticity and cosmopolitanism, contributing to an ongoing process of socio-spatial depolarization of the urban and rural.

Rurality and its real or imagined attributes (connection with nature, slow life, safety, community values, etc.) are certainly important, but do not necessarily represent the reason why people ultimately decide to move. Klien (2015; 2020) argues that the countryside or country lifestyle is not a key incentive for urban-rural migrants, who rather see their place of choice as 'the ideal setting for self-growth, challenge, and furthering their career goals' (2020:2). Most new entry farmers I met also emphasised that their reason for relocating was agriculture rather than rural living per se, and many aspiring farmers would actually like to farm while continuing to live in cities. The fact that even migrants explicitly seeking specific aspects of 'rurality' or rural lifestyles

do not necessarily reject the city (only a few people I met on fieldwork actually expressed aversion for city life) substantiate Halfacree's remark (2007; 2012) that anti-urbanism is not a prevalent aspect of contemporary pro-rural migration.

The choice to relocate from cities into rural areas often springs from the desire to improve certain aspects of one's lifestyle. These are not limited to poor work-life balance and dissatisfaction with corporate working culture, but also include specific welfare-related benefits. One example discussed in Chapter 2 is young parents relocating to the countryside for childrearing, an aspect also mentioned in studies on pro-rural migration elsewhere (Jensen and Svendsen 2007; Laoire 2007). Pro-rural migration also appears as an opportunity for self-realisation for youths without a clear idea of what to do in life, as demonstrated by the many ex-*furitā* (freeters) among new rural settlers. Klien (2020) emphasises the numerous analogies between lifestyle migrants abroad and urban-rural migrants, including the entrepreneurial attitude of many of them. Although many new settlers are driven by entrepreneurial goals, however, it would be at the same time wrong to equate urban-rural migrants with entrepreneurs. As discussed in Chapter 2, securing jobs in rural municipalities represents in fact a major obstacle faced by aspiring migrants. Once again, the motives behind people' decision to move can be extremely diverse. As Walford and Stockdale (2016) point out, the term 'lifestyle migration' risks being too all-encompassing, since almost every life-related aspect, possibly excluding working income, falls under this label.

Regional Japan and rural revitalisation

The recent rise of counterurbanisation is a welcome trend for many regions and municipalities confronted with depopulation and population ageing. However, considering the magnitude and characteristics of the phenomenon, the majority of towns and villages in Japan are unlikely to benefit from it. Geographically, urban-rural migration is an unevenly distributed phenomenon. As of 2014, the top five destination prefectures (Tottori, Okayama, Gifu, Shimane, and Nagano) absorbed almost half of all migrants (NHK et al. 2015). Migratory flows are mostly directed toward

regions-municipalities with an appealing climate-natural environment, job opportunities, welfare facilities, services, amenities, and a friendly community. While some people explicitly seek remote destinations, migrants tend not to relocate to depopulated municipalities, which is where they are mostly needed. On the contrary, the migratory flow toward depopulated municipalities steadily decreased between 2000 and 2015 (Sōmushō 2018b).

The rise of pro-rural migration prompted many municipalities to set up I-turn support offices and invest in advertising campaigns. As discussed in Chapter 2, the quest for attracting new settlers inevitably took the form of a competition similar to that for attracting tourists, based on the creation of 'images' (*imēji*) and the specialisation of services-opportunities offered to new settlers. Regions and towns that first built a reputation as I-turn destinations clearly have a competitive advantage. Odagiri et al. (2016:24) suggest that rural municipalities should make an effort to 'polish' themselves in order to become more attractive and trigger a virtuous circle whereby new settlers, communicating their positive experiences, will attract more people and induce local youth to stay. The 'polishing' process especially refers to the role of local administrations in taking a positive, proactive attitude. As discussed in Chapter 2, this aspect plays an important role in Tōmi's case and also emerged as central in cases like Okinoshima island in Shimane prefecture (Nagatomo 2016) or Taketa in Ōita Prefecture (Reiher 2020). Grassroot movements too can play an important role. For instance, Tanba city and Sasayama city in Hyogo prefecture became popular thanks to the work of local NPOs promoting the renovation of old, vacant houses used by new settlers to start restaurant or hospitality businesses. Similar to other revitalisation initiatives, together with municipalities' initial resources-conditions, another key aspect in the formation of popular I-Turn hubs is the role of influential figures like Naoki Shiomi in the case of Ayabe discussed in Chapter 2, Toyō Tamamura in the case of Tōmi's wine industry discussed in Chapter 1, and pioneer farmers who initiated the development of organic agriculture in Saku and Ōhara. Incidentally, these were all newcomers to the communities they contributed to revitalising. As Manzenreiter et al. (2020:295)

point out, new residents are a valuable source of innovative ideas when local knowledge and traditions prove to be of limited value.

Manzenreiter et al. (2020) adopt the term 'Japan's new ruralities' to challenge the idea of a homogeneous, hopeless rural Japan. Regional Japan is certainly characterised by great diversity that can be hardly captured by the simplistic centre-periphery dichotomy. Rural areas are entangled in networks of exchange and dependency at the regional, national, and global level contributing to the fluidity and hybridity of the countryside. More than these aspects, however, this study points to the many ways in which rural areas are still heavily influenced by and dependent on the 'centre.' Agriculture epitomises the political and economic dependence of peripheral areas on national policy. The transfer of resources from urban to rural regions has progressively declined since the 1990s, but agriculture remains heavily subsidised. In the past decade, the growing trend of new entry in agriculture contributing to pro-rural migration was significantly influenced by the introduction of new subsidies by the MAFF. Large *rokujisangyō* projects like Midō, Japan's largest vineyard in Tōmi, would not be possible without national subsidies. In Tōmi, the development of wine tourism, and, in large part, of its rising wine industry, would not be the same without convenient access from Tokyo.

That being said, municipalities originally utilise available resources and formulate inventive revitalisation strategies. Instead of promoting the establishment of large companies like the neighbouring towns, Tōmi's local administration encourages small-scale wine production, trusting that this will foster a more diverse, interesting wine scene and in turn attract more visitors as well as new settlers. So far, the intuition has proven to be successful. Thanks to numerous initiatives discussed in Chapter 1, the town has attracted entrepreneurs from all over the country and built up a reputation among wine enthusiasts. Whether new entrants will be able to live out of their activity however is far from certain and depends on their ability to sell considerable volumes of produce in a market dominated by foreign wine sold at one third of the price. This is especially true after the signing in 2019 of the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, which eliminated tariffs on

imported wines from Europe. Putting aside the fortunes of individual enterprises, wine is certainly helping Tōmi to stimulate its economy, attract new settlers, and bring pride and prestige to the entire community.

Needless to say, Tōmi's success comes at the expense of other towns investing in wine tourism in Nagano and in other prefectures. Competition for tourists and new settlers is tight, and Tōmi benefits from a number of competitive advantages. No matter how one looks at it, only a minority of towns and villages in Japan and indeed in many other post-industrial societies will escape demographic, economic, and infrastructural decline in the near future. As discussed in Chapter 4, property abandonment in Japan continues apace, contributing to the degradation of entire towns, and in turn prompting more people to leave. For local administrations, the growing number of absent, untraceable landlords means less property taxes and the draining of already depleted public purses. The urban sprawl characterising much of regional Japan further aggravates the situation as low population density determines higher costs of public services and maintenance of existing infrastructure. As Nozawa (2016) points out, local governments are usually insolvent, and many cannot keep up with necessary maintenance of thousands of kilometres of streets, bridges, pipes, wires, ditches, and sewers. Infrastructure maintenance is a mounting problem all over Japan. Failing to understand the benefits of compact cities, local administrations further aggravate the situation. If we exclude unforeseeable factors, regional Japan will be much more depopulated and crumbling in the near future. Only a minority of hamlets and towns will emerge unscathed and perhaps even thrive.

Is there a role for agriculture in the revitalisation of rural regions? As seen in Tōmi's case and in many other municipalities, agriculture has become an effective way to attract new settlers. As discussed in Chapter 6, while from a national policy perspective promoting greater participation in agriculture is presented as a matter of national security (enhancing national food self- sufficiency), from a local perspective it is first and foremost a way to repopulate rural areas. For the MAFF, the goal is to promote the formation of larger farming units, but this is not necessarily the goal of local

incumbents (or new entrants themselves), who may bend national policy to their need. This reconfirms the ambiguous role of 'agriculture,' a label encompassing at the same time an industry, lifestyle, and a space of welfare. Agriculture has long been used in Japan as a vehicle of welfare policy and today continues to fulfil this role beyond subsidies, as testified by the growing number of agricultural NPOs employing people with disabilities (Hamada 2016) and by JA's role in providing a safety net for weak residents (Iba et al. 2016). All over Japan, cooperatives act as non-profit, public organisations providing valuable services especially in rural communities, as seen in the case of JA Ueda Farm. More than 'agricultural cooperatives,' Japan's multi-purpose cooperatives are in fact rural cooperatives, in many ways still bearers of ideals of mutual aid rooted in the history of rural communities. The role of agriculture as lifestyle-welfare is also exemplified by retirement farming, a prominent phenomenon in Japan. For millions of Japanese retirees, farming represents a recreational activity, a source of pride, and a way to contribute to society (Takahashi 2016: 227). Aside from its role as a vehicle of welfare policy and a way to attract new settlers, agriculture also contributes to rural revitalisation through the creation of employment. As discussed in Chapter 6, a central question in the debate on farm enlargement is whether larger farms can better contribute to employment than the owner-cultivator model diffused in Japan. While some authors emphasise risks of 'corporatisation' and land grabbing (Sekine and Bonanno 2016), others see large farms benefitting from the specialisation of labour as more efficient and sustainable. As one participant put it, a large company is preferable to a myriad of small independent producers competing without cooperating in farm management.

The above observation raises a significant point linking to the debate on individualism and collectivism in Japanese society. The integrative nature of paddy field agriculture has long been used in Japan to explain the strong interdependence between members of rural communities and is constantly cited in explaining Japanese people's propensity for cooperation and group behaviour (Schnell 2005). Judging by the way agriculture is practiced in Japan today, however, one wonders whether farming communities are still the repository of cooperatist values or of an alleged

collectivist ethos. Paddy field agriculture in particular appears as a very individualistic enterprise: everyone farms in his own way, with pride, with his own machinery. Farmers don't like to share machinery and have used it to enhance their status in the community (Kuwayama 1992). The same is true for the emerging wine industry in Tōmi: despite the extremely small size of vineyards, which in theory should encourage cooperation and partnerships, everyone wants his own brand and his own winery, even when this makes little economic sense. New entrants come to the countryside with individualistic values that are not in contrast with the way agriculture is practiced. 'Farmers compete in production and cooperate in processing and marketing' is something you often hear. Farmers share sorting-shipment-processing facilities and have long marketed their produce through JA based on a joint calculation system, but this model is progressively collapsing, and this is in part due to the fact that farmers want to have their individual brand recognised. Collective hamlet-based farms are often cited as an example of cooperation, but as a matter of fact these entities are typically established out of necessity to capture subsidies (Jentzsch 2016) and their success is often hindered by people's pride and individual interests (Miyake 2016). Already in the 1970s, Dore (1978) saw much individualism in Japan's rural society and pointed to the fact that collectivism is often the result of peer pressure and hierarchy rather than of an alleged cultural predisposition (Dore and Whittaker 2001:45). This aspect is quite evident when looking at agricultural cooperatives and pressure they exert on farmers, who fear being subjected to social stigma should they decide to distance themself from JA. Cooperatist values characterising the old *mura shakai* (hamlet society) survive in forms of rituality and mutual aid, but agriculture is certainly not the repository nor the engine of an alleged collectivistic ethos. Claiming like Sekine and Bonanno (2016) that 'neoliberalism' is incompatible with the socio-cultural foundations of rural communities appears quite inappropriate when looking at agriculture.

Japanese agriculture

Japanese agriculture has undergone remarkable transformation in the past three decades. Judging by the steady reduction of production volumes and the ageing and shrinking of the farming population, this 'transformation' appears as a sharp decline. The decline is indeed undeniable, and proof of the unsustainable character of Japan's smallholding model. In spite of high levels of market protection and state support, many farming households are in fact unable to reproduce themselves because of lack of successors. This is largely due to the small size of farms, which do not provide sufficient income and are therefore unappealing to successors, a common occurrence in smallholder agriculture countries (Lukas and Sutherland 2015). More fundamentally, however, the reason arguably lies in how the Japanese and in particular rural youth continue to see farming as an unappealing job, and metropolitan areas as sites of career success and self-realization. One hectare of paddy guarantees little or no income, but the same area can be very profitable if converted into vegetable production. If they wanted to, youths born into farming families could take advantage of the plethora of subsidies, financial incentives, counselling, and market opportunities available to convert old farms into profitable enterprises. Strictly speaking, the problem is not acreage or farm size, but willingness to become a farmer and an entrepreneur.

This aspect tends to be overlooked by critics of Japan's agricultural regime, who, more or less implicitly, attribute the decline of agriculture to agrarian structure (e.g. Honma and George Mulgan 2018). Land fragmentation produces inefficiencies and limits farm expansion, but this is mostly true for extensive agriculture. For most profitable crops, more than land fragmentation, the greatest limit to farm expansion and competitiveness is arguably labour shortage and the high cost of labour. This is especially true for entrepreneurial agriculture, since family farms are usually dimensioned according to the available labour force of the family. Even if farmland rapidly consolidated and Japanese farms were to double or triple their size, the effect on production costs would be negligible, as demonstrated by the growing number of large collective farms running a deficit (Nōgyō Shinbun 24 July 2020). In Italy, consolidated fruit orchards of 50-100ha (100-200 times the average Japanese orchard) go out of business because they are unable to withstand international

competition despite a suitable climate, mechanisation, and availability of cheap foreign labour (Scanu 2015). This is not to say that land consolidation would not bring benefits to Japanese agriculture, but one should be aware that moderate increases in scale economies are not so significant in a global market characterised by very diverse regulation regimes and labour markets.

Together with the role of agrarian structure, critics of Japan's agricultural policy regime tend to overemphasise the role of agricultural policy and JA in inhibiting land consolidation. As the story goes, market protection and state support allowed the survival of part-time farming, in turn preventing professional farmers from consolidating farmland. Market deregulation and liberalisation is thus needed to push small, inefficient farmers out of business (e.g. Honma and George Mulgan 2018:136). This narrative is misleading as inflated commodity prices and subsidies only played a minor role in inhibiting farmland transfers. Reluctance to relinquish farmland depends on the value placed on it. Land in Japan has long been considered valuable because of expectations to convert it to other uses and make a capital gain (Noguchi 1992). Low taxation on farmland has been certainly a contributing factor and arguably also the result of JA's lobbying activity, but land fragmentation remains first and foremost the consequence of sustained urban development and the lax implementation of regulation on farmland conversion (Godo 2007). As shown in the case of house abandonment, land issues are not limited to rural areas or agricultural policy. Up until the 1990s, when paddy agriculture still guaranteed a side income, inflated rice prices and subsidies provided an additional disincentive to relinquish farmland and quit farming. Today, however, part-time rice farming is no longer profitable and often a net loss, yet landowners are still reluctant to transfer farmland in areas that could be included in future urban development plans. Together with economic value, moreover, sentimental value and prestige value should not be underestimated. As discussed in Chapter 4, legacies of the traditional hamlet society reproduce kinship and prestige as strong ideological drives influencing the way property is conceived and dealt with. As a JA official told me, pride, envy, and grudges significantly contributed to inhibiting land consolidation.

The reproduction of Japan's agrarian structure is the complex product of values, social norms, practices, and regulation. Reducing this complexity to agricultural policy and JA's lobbing activity is misleading at best. Labour shortage, another key factor influencing the reproduction of Japan's smallholding model, is the consequence of rural depopulation and Japan's immigration policy, both elements unrelated to agricultural policy/politics. More generally, there is more to Japanese agriculture than entrenched vested interests. Inertia and path-dependence are not simply driven by politics and clientelism, but by the centripetal pull of a constellation of material and social factors inhibiting change. As discussed in Chapter 5, the evolution of fruit farming conditioned consumption practices, quality standards, and machinery design, which in turn continue to create incentives to reproduce small-scale farming. Economic interest is undoubtedly a strong drive for people and organisations, but this study clearly demonstrates the equally important role played by materiality, ideas, and social norms.

Critics of Japan's agricultural policy regime rightly point to JA's role in inhibiting competition and in turn the dynamism of more productive, entrepreneurial producers. The most evident example is price-stabilisation measures controlling production, as in the case of Hokkaido milk producers (Hansen 2014:60) or in the case of fruit discussed in Chapter 5. Because the majority of Japanese farmers would be forced out of business by escalating price-based competition, JA lobbying activity has always focused on isolating producers from foreign competitors through border policies and domestically by means of regulation. JA's effort to protect its part-time/small-scale farmers base domestically through regulation inevitably comes at the expense of more entrepreneurial producers. At the same time, two aspects often neglected should be mentioned about the relation between JA and professional farmers. First, full-time farmers, too, greatly benefit from the agricultural policy regime. Second, agricultural cooperatives do not in principle oppose farm enlargement. Cooperative members willing to expand their activity are actually encouraged to do so for the good of the community, for instance to prevent farmland abandonment. Farmers distancing themselves from JA may occasionally face hostility, but this has

not prevented hundreds of thousands of producers from experimenting with new business models. In eastern Nagano prefecture, cooperative members regularly buy farming inputs and sell their crop outside of the JA distribution system. At least in the case of fruit, they are even encouraged to do so. As discussed in Chapter 7, moreover, agricultural cooperatives have also been expanding contracts outside of the wholesale market to meet the demands of some of their members, mostly core farmers. These could certainly be depicted as insufficient, 'reluctant concessions' to prevent the departure of professional farmers, yet they should not be overlooked.[277]

Many agricultural cooperatives as well as the entire JA group find themselves at a crossroad. They must mediate between different interests and needs, but can no longer allow the fleeing of core farmers financially as well as politically. Notwithstanding the recent attack on JA by the LDP government led by Shinzo Abe, the organisation must reform itself in order to survive. Most agricultural divisions run a growing deficit and are artificially kept alive by the more profitable credit and insurance arms (Esham et al. 2012). Because multipurpose cooperatives must distribute their limited management resources among many departments and services, they also lack specialisation, with more talented staff members usually employed in their credit divisions (Ishida 2002). As discussed in Chapter 7 concerning the establishment of direct sales divisions, compared to commercial enterprises, cooperatives often lack talented staff and procedures for improving human resources. Separating the services provided (i.e. turning multi-purpose cooperatives into specialised ones) would result in the dissolution of too many services, and is therefore an unviable option. At the same time, the overlapping of so many different activities creates numerous problems. Every service provided by cooperatives has a different optimal scale, with credit or mutual insurance typically requiring larger scales than agricultural services (Ishida 2002).

[277] Significant differences of course exist among cooperatives. Such differences are often explained through the character (e.g. dynamism) of cooperatives' members or their leadership, but the most important factor is arguably the characteristics or composition of local agriculture (e.g. cooperatives operating in rice production areas tend to be more conservative). Critics of Japan's agricultural regime often emphasise the difference between potentially proactive, dynamic cooperatives, and reactionary, self-interested JA upper tiers (e.g. Honma and George Mulgan 2018:134; Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016:444; Honma 2017:192).

Cooperative mergers aimed at cutting costs for financial services often complicate the provision of agricultural services. In many parts of the country, it was extremely difficult to integrate production groups following the large-area amalgamations (*kōiki gappei*) of the 1990s and 2000s.[278] It can take many years for new, enlarged groups to coordinate production (e.g. varieties, quality standards) and marketing. In many cases, mergers do not result into a strengthening of production areas (Morozumi 2008). Following amalgamations, many cooperatives established larger collection and shipping facilities to improve their logistics, but this came at the expenses of members living far apart. Similar effects can be also seen in fisheries (Ganseforth 2020).

Improving the condition of agricultural divisions and meeting the demands of professional farmers lie at the core of JA's so-called self-reforms. The reform plan is based on three key points: improving the marketing of farm products, the supply of production inputs, and shifting JA's human resources from financial to agricultural business (NRI 2018a). Doubts however remain about cooperatives' ability to implement the reforms. Results of yearly surveys conducted by the MAFF (2020) show that over half of core farmers continue not to see significant results, albeit the trend has been progressively improving. As discussed in Chapter 7, many core farmers are unhappy about the JA consignment system and ask for the expansion of direct deals with large food companies, bypassing wholesalers. However, the process requires time and resources and largely depends on the characteristics of the local agriculture.

Japan's agricultural policy regime remains problematic because of the conspicuous transfer of resources from urban to rural areas required to sustain domestic producers, as well as for the repercussions of protectionist measures on Japan's trade policy. Especially in the case of paddy field agriculture, one might legitimately wonder about the opportunity to continue sustaining highly inefficient micro farms with taxpayers' money on top of tariffs. The answer ultimately lies in the priorities and ideological perspectives adopted. The classic economic view posits that countries

[278] In Nagano prefecture, in 1965 there were 296 cooperatives, but in 1980 only 136 were left, generally following municipalities mergers. Large mergers going beyond municipalities began in the second half of the 1980s. Between 1985 and 1995 the number of cooperatives shrunk from 127 to 48. Today only 16 are left.

should specialise in the production of goods and services in which they have a comparative advantage and import what they need on a market basis. In this perspective, for Japan it makes no economic sense to grow extensive crops such as rice, wheat, or soybeans. Given Japan's competitive disadvantage in most crops production due to its climate, agrarian structure, scarcity and high cost of labour, the country should actually import most of its food and specialise in a limited number of crops and niche products. However, specialisation is fundamentally antithetical to self-sufficiency.[279] Should long-term food security concerns prevail over the immediate benefits of free trade? Paddy field agriculture is important for environment preservation, but is this a good enough reason to justify protectionist policies and agricultural subsidies weighing on consumers and taxpayers? Similar questions lie at the core of debates on agricultural policy in all industrialised countries. In Italy, much like rice subsidies in Japan, subsidies to wheat and other extensive crop production have gradually shrunk along with the number of farmers in the depopulating countryside. To be sure, excluding some forms of capital-intensive farming, agriculture in the global north cannot survive without some level of state support or market protection, so this is ultimately a matter of degree. Given Japan's competitive disadvantage in food production, one might argue that a higher level of support is required. Together with the magnitude of support, its modality is also problematic. While most countries substantially moved toward a decoupling of payments guaranteeing greater transparency, Japan still relies significantly on protectionist, market-distortive policies (OECD 2009; 2013b; 2020). A shift from border measures to direct payments is desirable but requires a budget expansion that the MAFF can hardly achieve given tight competition for resources among ministries.

Despite the numerous factors inhibiting change, Japanese agriculture is gradually changing. Agricultural economists have long denounced the detrimental effects of Japan's agricultural policy

[279] There are many ways to define and look at 'food security' (see for instance Honma 2015), but if one focuses on food self-sufficiency in the medium term, it is fair to claim that the slow expansion of export-oriented production would hardly compensate for the huge production loss caused by a removal of tariffs/subsidies both in terms of volume and calorie base.

(e.g. Hayami 1988), but only now are times mature for meaningful change. The weakening of the agricultural iron triangle is demonstrated by the recent clash between JA and LDP as well as by the progressive redirection of agricultural subsidies toward commercial farms. The MAFF arguably still needs the agricultural policy regime to justify its role and reproduce itself as an organisation (George Mulgan 2006), but farm enlargement has clearly assumed high priority on its political agenda. Change comes in unpredictable ways. A bad harvest can open the door to imports, as discussed in Chapter 5; then an accident/disaster reinvigorates food security concerns, reinforcing the claims of state support advocates. Even in this case, the repercussions are difficult to foresee. For instance, the debate surrounding the TPP unexpectedly led to the emergence of a new narrative of 'strong agriculture' reminding the Japanese public that agriculture can be more than a static, resource-draining sector (Whittaker and Scollay 2019). Change also comes from slow, invisible drifts, such as demographic trends reducing the weight of the rural vote and eroding JA's political power (Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016). Policy change is the result of shifting power relations but also of changes in the way people perceive and understand agricultural issues. For sure, as pointed out in previous studies, fuelling food scares (Reiher and Yamaguchi 2016) and misrepresenting problems surrounding farmland (Godo 2007), food self-sufficiency (Asakawa 2014:186-191; Honma 2015:325) or the ageing of farmers (Asakawa 2014: 96) does not contribute to a lucid, democratic debate. Regrettably, Japanese farmers came to be represented as spoiled and inefficient because of lack of competition. As a matter of fact, there is a lot of competition in Japanese agriculture, but it is based on quality rather than on price. Prefectures, regions, and production groups compete on branding, variety improvement, and production technology. No country to my knowledge dedicates so much attention and care to the marketing of fresh produce. Excluding part-time rice 'farmers' and other hobby famers, Japanese producers do what they can to increase sales and profits. They are ingenious and have a clear understanding of concepts such as optimisation and efficiency but cannot compete on price in an open market.

This study focused on the establishment of small-scale farms and on initial stages of farm management. Together with the acquisition of land, know-how, capital, and markets, a research exploring successive phases of farm management should also focus on labour. Labour is a key factor of production and, as previously mentioned, a scarce and expensive one in Japan. In many parts of the country, it is extremely difficult to secure a stable workforce, so family farming remains the most viable option. New entry farmers I met in Nagano relied on occasional, mostly volunteering labourers during busy periods: friends or relatives visiting from Tokyo, other new entrants met during training, old local residents, etc. Farm site emerges even in this case as a significant variable. New entry farmers in Ōhara could in fact secure part-time and full-time employees more easily than those in Nagano. The ageing of Japan's farming population is often indicated as problematic, but, ironically, a major source of agricultural wage labour in Japan is represented by retirees happy to work part-time for a relatively low pay. JA Ueda Farm could not operate without the help of so-called *shirubā* (silvers). Considering problems springing from labour shortages, the introduction of subsidies for farms hiring full-time employees in 2009 proved to be an extremely effective policy. Unlike production subsidies and badly administrated investment subsidies, employment subsidies also have the merit of promoting labour-intensive agriculture and farm expansion. Labour shortage is not only problematic for agricultural production, but for the entire industry, as demonstrated by rising distribution costs determined by the shortage of truck drivers and personnel working in sorting facilities (Nōgyō Shinbun 9 July 2019). Labour is a key factor of production and arguably the greatest limit to competitiveness in Japanese agriculture. Most industrialised countries accept to rely on underpaid, often exploited foreign labour for their food production. In Japan, the infamous 'training system' certainly leads to cases of exploitation, but the situation is not comparable in scope (MOJJ 2019) and possibly in character (Ando and Horiguchi 2013; Liang 2014) to that of most other industrialised countries.[280] Much can be said about the

[280] Recent studies on foreign agricultural labourers in Europe and their exploitation include Corrado (2017), Corrado et al. (2017), Rye and Scott (2018), Semprebon et al. (2017), European Parliament (2018).

immigration policy as well as the labour legislation (and its implementation) of different countries, but cutting the cost of labour remains one of the most effective and easy ways for economic actors to stay competitive and raise profits.

Agrarian change and agri-food industry

As countries industrialise, growing concentration in agriculture is typically accompanied by the progressive demise of smallholdings and the declining number of people finding sustenance on the land. The process producing social, material, and biophysical conditions that are not conducive to the reproduction of agrarian and land-based livelihoods is broadly referred to in the scholarly literature as deagrarianisation (Hebinick 2018:227). Because the class traditionally finding sustenance on the land is the peasantry, deagrarianisation is usually synonymous of de-peasantisation. Agrarian Marxism conceives peasants as petty commodity producers progressively displaced or converted into capitalist farmers. Displaced peasants can turn into rural proletariat or abandon agrarian lifestyles to find employment in other industries. In the latter case, low-wage labour required by many capitalist farms is provided by workers from poorer countries, whether production is delocalised, or workforce is imported.

As a matter of fact, the disappearance of family farms has not yet taken place as repeatedly predicted, and the differentiation of peasants into rural proletariat and capitalist farmers has long been challenged by many anthropologists and rural sociologists showing how peasants are variously constituted in different times and places. Diversity characterizing processes of agrarian change and accumulation of agrarian capital is well exemplified in Japan's case, a fully developed market economy where concentration is still limited, and the demise of smallholdings experienced in other industrialized countries throughout the second half of the 20th century only started to intensify in the 1990s. Together with agrarian structure, food distribution in Japan also provides a peculiar case among industrialised countries, most notably due to the presence of a powerful farmers' cooperative group and a large food wholesale market. The analysis of fruit production-consumption presented in

Chapter 5 shows for instance that fresh food supply chains in Japan are often producer-driven, in countertendency with global trends (Ponte and Gibbon 2005). The analysis of Japan's fresh food wholesale market presented in Chapter 7 also shows the role of this institution in limiting the detrimental effects of asymmetric market power in food supply chains.

While alternative food networks have recently received much attention in anthropology, sociology, and geography, different configurations of 'conventional' food distribution have enjoyed much less consideration. Popular concepts such as 'corporate food regime' (McMichael 2009) and 'food empire' (Van der Ploeg 2008) central to what Bernstein (2014, 2016) dubs the 'peasant turn' of agrarian political economy have arguably contributed to obscure significant differences characterising agri-food systems in capitalist economies. As Wilkinson and Goodman (2019:143) point out, the homogenizing framework of 'regimes' and hegemonic strategy fails to recognize alternative developmental trajectories and highly differentiated institutional landscapes. To be sure, many scholars in the field of agri-food studies recognise the manner in which 'agricultural change is shaped and reshaped in different places and at different scales and grounded in specific historical geographies' (Niles and Roff 2008:3), highlighting the permeability and multiplicity of production systems (Dixon 2002), competing 'worlds of food' (Morgan et al. 2006), or food networks (Goodman 2003). Ongoing debates on the emergence of a 'third global food regime' (Friedmann 2005; McMichael 2005, 2009; Bernstein 2016) or on a 'second great transformation' of agriculture (Allaire and Daviron 2019) exemplify difficulties in reconciling diversification occurring within and among agri-food systems.

Uniqueness characterising Japanese agriculture has been often highlighted in previous studies, yet only few attempts have been made to contextualise Japan's case within a broader agri-food theoretical framework (Whittaker and Scollay 2019; Hisano et al. 2018; Sekine and Bonanno 2016) or to consider peculiar features of its food distribution in a comparative perspective. Moreover, as Graeme (2016:228) and others (Perfecto et al. 2009: 7; Pritchard et al. 2014: 59) point out, research on food systems from the perspective of national policy and global markets on the one hand, and

bottom-up views focussing on local food traditions and actors on the other, are rarely combined and integrated. These two 'food-world-views' often appear worlds apart, and their proponents routinely talk past each other (Graeme 2016:228). This study attempted to tackle this shortcoming and demonstrate the importance of a more comprehensive, comparative approach to Japanese agriculture avoiding reinforcing Japan's exceptionalism. This is particularly evident as Japan's agri-food system transforms rapidly under the pressure of market forces and political reforms (Sekine and Bonanno 2016; Maclachlan and Shimizu 2016), possibly suggesting global convergence.

Japan's agrarian structure is undergoing remarkable transformation, with rapid deagrarianisation accompanied by a much slower process of concentration. The part-time survival strategy adopted by many Japanese farming households throughout the 1960s-1980s and now largely replaced by a less effective 'retirement survival strategy' appears to have only delayed rather than prevented the displacement of smallholdings. As Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal (2010:188) point out, 'Kautsky and Lenin already suggested that the resolution of the agrarian question could take multiple and diverse forms, rooted in the specific circumstances of particular farming practices, agricultural processes, and the conditions by which surplus labour is extracted from the direct producer.' What Watts (1998, 450) terms 'recombinant' agrarian capital might, in particular circumstances, prefer to sustain 'a hybrid non-capitalist rural economy subsumed to capital because of the unique characteristics of agricultural production (e.g. its seasonal and biological aspects and associated risks) as well as the capacity of family farm production to, as Marx noted, depress real wages by working longer and harder, and in so doing sustain an ability to compete with agrarian capital' (Akram-Lodhi and Cristóbal 2010:188). In such circumstances, according to Kautsky (1988), agroindustrial capital would restrict itself to food processing, distribution, farm inputs, and rural financial systems, using science, technology, and money to progressively subsume petty commodity production. This has been undoubtedly the prevalent trend so far, and on this ground many scholars continue to predict the inevitable demise of family farms (e.g. Bernstein 2016; Rigg 2006; Araghi 1995). That being said, the agrarian question and the future of global agri-food

economy remains open because of ultimately unpredictable strategies adopted by capital (Friedmann 2005; Allaire and Daviron 2019), producers (Woods 2014; Van der Ploeg 2018), and nations states. This is especially true in times of unprecedented technological, demographic, and environmental change. Similar to the 2008 financial crisis, the current Covid-19 pandemic shows for instance that the vulnerability of food supply chains differs strongly across food systems, with global interdependencies and growing dependency of the real economy on the financial economy as complicating factors (Fairbairn 2014; Clapp and Isakson 2018). As Van der Ploeg (2020) points out, unlike smallholdings, many entrepreneurial, typically indebted farms often lack agility to deal with shocks and have a higher risk of stumbling over their own size.

As discussed in Chapter 6, potential risks associated with large-scale, entrepreneurial agriculture are not the greatest threat faced by rural communities at the moment. At the current level of concentration, evoking the spectre of corporatisation and land grabbing by pointing at the relaxation of regulations for non-farming companies to engage in agriculture or the way the MAFF encourages the incorporation of family farms (e.g. Sekine and Bonanno 2016; Hisano and Sekine 2009) appears overall unjustified given the insignificant role played by 'corporate farms' (Jentzsch 2016) as well as the policy goals behind these reforms and their utilisation (Lollini 2019), discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Even authors adopting this language (e.g. Sakamoto and Iba 2020) concede that incorporated family farms are, after all, nothing more than family farms. More than in the realm of production, it is through market deregulation and liberalisation that neoliberal policy becomes disrupting and produces a redistribution of wealth and power. The effects of market liberalisations on producers have been discussed throughout the thesis and are usually quite self-evident. Less evident are the effects of deregulation on food distribution and in particular on a peculiar feature of Japan's food system, the survival of a large wholesale market for fresh food and its ties with agricultural cooperatives.

As discussed in Chapter 7, Japan's vegetable and fruit wholesale market provides a valuable example of an institution guaranteeing transparency of price formation and ameliorating risks

associated with the exercise of asymmetric market power. All over the world, producers are usually the weakest link of food chains, squeezed between large, multinational companies upstream and downstream farms. The restructuring of food chains operated by large food retailers in particular has led to a situation whereby smaller farmers are increasingly marginalised or driven out of business (McMichael and Friedmann 2007; Young 2012). As large retailers compete for ever lower shelf prices, producers too are caught in a spiral of cost reduction, a race to the bottom contributing to the adoption of controversial labour and environmental practices (e.g. Moreton 2009; Lichtenstein 2005). While not all economists accept the neoclassical framework centered on the equilibrium model and therefore what constitutes 'adequate and fair' competition (Harvey 2013:6), growing market concentration and highly asymmetric power relations characterising modern food supply chains appear far removed from what most people and possibly most economists would consider 'adequate and fair.' State regulation can theoretically correct market distortions or prevent their detrimental effects, but this is easier said than done. As discussed in Chapter 7, exercise of buyer power in the food industry is common and its magnitude is likely underestimated as only a minority of cases surface because of risks of de-listing for suppliers filing a complaint.

In the long-term, problems characterizing modern food chains might be progressively ameliorated in response to consumers' demands for transparency and fair labour and environmental practices, but in the short-medium-term, preserving a balance of power along the chain remains the most realistic solution. A common strategy adopted by producers to obtain countervailing power has long been to establish cooperatives for the collective purchase of agricultural inputs and for sale of farm products (Bijman and Hendrikse 2003). Cooperatives' success depends on numerous factors, including their size, and under certain conditions so-called countervailing power can even turn into superior market power. This is arguably the case in Japan, where more than problems associated with oligopsony, the power wielded by agricultural cooperatives has long led to anti-competitive behaviour on producers' side. As discussed in Chapter 7, powerful prefectural federations like Nagano Zen-nō have actively used their superior bargaining position to achieve

higher prices in wholesale markets, and, as discussed in Chapter 5, cooperatives coordinate or collude to control production and shipments in order to raise prices in wholesale markets. So far, institutionalised forms of cooperation among producers have largely prevented the emergence in Japan of problems associated with exercise of buyer power, but ongoing trends discussed in this study, including the diffusion of agricultural contracts, the expansion of cooperatives' sales outside of wholesale markets, and deregulation of wholesale markets, will inevitably erode producers' collective power, for better or worse.

The ongoing transformation of the Japanese agri-food system exemplifies the tension between the individual and aggregate benefits of cooperation and competition, difficulties in balancing market imperatives of efficiency with considerations of equity, and uncertainty surrounding the short-term and long-term sustainability of different development models. As previously mentioned, the agrarian question and the future of agri-food industry and ecology remains open, as demonstrated by ongoing debate in the food regimes tradition (Bernstein 2016; Friedmann 2016), or in French regulation school and conventions theory (Allaire and Boyer 1995; Allaire and Daviron 2019). Given the number of converging global issues ahead, food security will continue to remain a top priority at the global, national, and regional level. Achieving greater sustainability and resilience in our food systems will certainly provide an impetus for change, possibly leading to more socially sensible forms of food production and consumption beyond niche, alternative food networks.

Other contributions

Previous sections summarised the findings of this study on new entry in agriculture, pro-rural migration, and rural revitalisation in Japan, as well as the transformation of Japanese agriculture and broader trends of agrarian change in industrialised countries. Together with contributing to anthropological literature on rural Japan and deagrarianisation, this study also contributes to other debates within the discipline.

The analysis of fruit production and consumption presented in Chapter 5 contributes to anthropological literature on food consumption and food commodity chains. Anthropologists studying food commodities have often focussed on the distribution of benefits along the chain and implications for regulation (e.g. Ziegler 2007; Faier 2011; West 2012; Fabinyi 2013). Ethnographies informed by world-systems theory have also examined historical patterns of commodity trade and influences on local patterns of social life (Mintz 1986). Tracking matsutake commerce and ecology, Tsing (2015) originally explores precarious livelihoods and precarious environments in the global landscape. The analysis of fruit supply chains presented in Chapter 5 shows how the reproduction of farming practices and consumption habits, naturalised as the product of tradition and the expression of culture, is largely driven by policy as expression of economic interests. Similar to Bestor (2004), who shows the role of distribution intermediaries as 'gatekeepers' influencing the reproduction of Japanese culinary tastes, this study demonstrates how the collective action of producers is also a key determinant of what ultimately gets eaten.

This study also contributes to debates in economic anthropology through the discussion of Japan's fresh food distribution. The analysis of Japan's food wholesale market presented in Chapter 7 focuses on the notable overlapping of market principle and marketplace, two elements typically contrasted in anthropological studies of markets (Applbaum 2005). This convergence is shown to produce a transparent mechanism of price formation, an element postulated in equilibrium models in economic theory but rarely a feature of real markets. Social scientists have long understood prices as the outcome of struggles between market actors rather than as naturally emerging from the market mechanism (Durkheim 1947; Weber 1978; Bourdieu 2005). Following a line of inquiry opened by Marx and Polanyi, recent anthropological theories of price have been for instance concerned with the composition of prices in an effort to reveal the effacement of the politics and conflicts that lie behind their formation and cultural justification (Ballestero 2015; Besky 2016; Guyer 2009; in Luetchford and Orlando 2019). At the same time, little attention has been paid in economic anthropology or economic sociology to practices and institutions fostering fair

competition in commodity markets (Beckert 2011; Luetchford and Orlando 2019). Studies analysing how prices are regulated by authorities describe ways in which the market mechanism is suspended rather than preserved (Dinler 2019), and while ethnographic studies on bargaining in physical markets (e.g. Alexander 1987; Clark 1994; Gordon 2010) tell us little about price formation in commodity markets, commodity chain studies typically miss out dynamics of price formation as negotiations at each link of the chain can hardly be documented (Fabinyi 2013). The analysis of Japan's food wholesale market provided an example of institutions guaranteeing price transparency and in turn fostering fair competition in a highly distorted market such as agri-food.

This study also contributes to anthropological literature on cooperatives. Anthropological interest in cooperatives has been evident since Mauss, who was actively involved in cooperativism (Hart 2007:5). In the 1960s, the ethnographic study of grassroots organizations such as rural cooperatives and collectives begun to emerge as new field of anthropological enquiry, and in the 1970s and 1980s many anthropologists, informed mainly by political economy and by institutional economics, produced important work in the field of cooperative studies, keeping the focus on rural organizations for the most part (Nash and Hopkins 1976; Attwood and Baviskar 1988; Attwood et al. 1987; in Vargas-Cetina 2005:232). Ever since, numerous studies discussed the changing role and varying success of cooperatives and their legacy (Acheson 1988; Baviskar 1980; Netting 1982; Wade 1988; Mosse 2003; Rakopoulos 2014). This study contributes to this strand of literature by illustrating ongoing transformation of agricultural cooperatives and JA, arguably the largest farmer-based organization in the world and a unique example of multi-purpose cooperative (Esham et al. 2012; Ishida 2002; Kurimoto 2004).

Study limitations and future research

Agriculture is a very diverse industry made up by millions of people growing and selling many different products in very different contexts. To approach agriculture as an industry is in itself an analytical stance, so realm is perhaps a better word. As in any other realm, material, social, and

institutional dimensions are intertwined, and each element only makes sense in relation to the others. With this research I tried to account for this complexity, albeit in a limited setting and from a bounded perspective. Its bounded perspective inevitably represents a limitation of this study. The cases of fruit farmers in Nagano or that of JA Ueda Farm are by no means representative of the situation in the country, so future ethnographic studies in other parts of Japan would certainly provide new insights and perspectives on the issues discussed. Another limitation of this study concerns the attempts to compare Japan's case to EU countries and Italy in particular on matters such as agricultural policy, farming practices, food distribution, etc. My choice was partly dictated by convenience because of my past work experience, but also by the fact that Italy arguably provides a suitable point of comparison with Japan, as discussed in Chapter 1. Future studies would benefit from comparative work in a more systematic way. Finally, as previously mentioned, this study focussed on the establishment of small-scale farms and on initial stages of farm management, but future research exploring farm expansion should focus on labour. Future studies might fruitfully explore labour issues based on geographical differences.

Finally, another valuable research avenue links to the role and the reform of JA beyond the provision of agricultural services. JA largely came to be known in the English-speaking world as a powerful farmers lobby and interest group, disregarding its numerous other roles and functions. Somehow surprisingly, English literature on the role of multipurpose cooperatives as welfare providers is almost non-existent. Cooperatives in Japan have long provided mutual trust and insurance beyond the public order, outside of legal regulation. As Najita (1996:362) points out, their history is grounded in a mistrust in politics among commoners, 'a history that cautions against depending excessively upon the overall competence of modern states in providing health and economic care for the people.' As nation states progressively withdraw from providing social services and public institutions are increasingly operated based on criteria of efficiency, the study of a voluntary institution inspired by principles of mutual aid and counting over ten million members

appears more important than ever. Such study would be especially of interest for economic anthropologists and other scholars interested in the moral economy.

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