

A Regional Agriculture and New Farmers

—a case study from Ohara, Kyoto—

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This thesis focuses on six farming households consisting of “New Farmers” (a category given to farming households that started a new independent farming enterprise) in the Ohara region of northern Kyoto City. “New Farmers”, rather than their ability to replace the older generation of farmers, as originally hoped in the early 1980’s, have come to be seen more as a trigger for fundamental change in how agriculture has been widely practiced. Their affirmative and progressive outlook on agriculture presents a new opportunity to reevaluate agriculture within the larger context of environmental issues.

Six new farming households moving into a village within a short span of time (between 2007 and 2009), is a significant addition to a community of less than 2500 people. Each household has started to farm under different circumstances, and have different strategies for sustaining their agricultural lifestyle. Limitations and challenges these farmers face such as unstable land tenure or not being fully accepted in the local community are widely shared among new young farmers throughout Japan. Such limitations not only affect their stability, but also prevent many from investing in their soil, which is an essential part of organic forms of farming. However, many factors have contributed to their overall success thus far. Their effort to support each other by forming a unit has helped them get more recognition, as well as help them inspire each other to improve their farming skills. The “Village Station”, a market for local agricultural products, opening in 2008, and Ohara’s geographical proximity to the urban center of Kyoto were also significant factors

Learning from the success of these young farmers, some local people are beginning to show interest in promoting “organic” agriculture throughout the region. In this way, Ohara is a case where new young farmers are inspiring change. However, care must be taken to see how “organic” is understood. All too often, “organic” as a label has been misused as a business strategy.

Agricultural methods must be compatible to the land on which it is being practiced. The new young farmers are trying to find their own way to sustainably live as farmers in Ohara. In such a way, there is something to be learned from the local small scale agricultural tradition in Ohara. However, images of a “professional farmer”, the idealization of full time farmers influence the ways in which farming is perceived. This thesis argues that a truly “environmentally friendly” and sustainable agriculture in Ohara must be based on farming that supports a way of life, rather than a way of life that supports agricultural production.

In this way, it must be understood that what has supported, and will support the new young farmers is not only their ability to produce and earn an income, but their ability to understand and live with the community’s socio-cultural along with the ecological environment of flexibility and mutual support.