

Message to the World from Rural Studies in Japan: Evolving Agenda and Lessons for the Future

Japanese Association for Rural Studies

1. Introduction to the Association: The Establishment of “Sonken” and Its Path to Becoming an Association

The Japanese Association for Rural Studies (commonly known as “Sonken”) is an association composed of researchers who perform analyses targeting “rural areas” from multifaceted viewpoints that include economics, history, and sociology. The Society for Rural Studies, which was the association’s predecessor, was launched at the end of 1952 and its first official research meeting was held in October 1953 at Tohoku University. Therefore, the year 2012 marked the 60-year anniversary since the establishment of Sonken. ARUGA Kizaemon and FUKUTAKE Tadashi, who had been a central researcher from back in those days, played leading roles in the establishment of the Society for Rural Studies. In fact, it was clearly specified in the first volume of *Research News* (April 18, 1953) that the association’s Headquarters would be situated at the Department of Sociology, Tokyo University of Education, with which Aruga was affiliated, and its News Editing Division was situated at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Letters, University of Tokyo, with which Fukutake was affiliated. At the symposium commemorating its 30-year anniversary (published in *Research News* Volume 129, August 1982) the circumstances at the time of its initial launch were discussed in a variety of different ways. These revealed a number of things, such as the fact that it was established as a research association in which a broad range of people could take part, including researchers studying fishing villages. This came about by virtue of the fact that “rural studies” had been used in its name rather than a term like “agricultural village studies.” It also revealed that while sociologists had played a central role in its launch, there were aspirations that it would deepen research from a comprehensive viewpoint that included a variety of other fields, such as economics, history, and law. It could be claimed that the movement for and momentum towards striving to achieve a general synthesis of the problems facing postwar Japan—such as agrarian reforms and democratization—in research fields formed the backdrop against which Sonken was launched.

In 1993, exactly 40 years after the launch of Sonken, the Society for Rural Studies got a fresh start as the Japanese Association for Rural Studies. Following Sonken’s conversion to an association it worked out new policies for its activities which included: (1) introducing a Chairperson position (KAKIZAKI Kyoichi was the member who became the first Chairperson), (2) establishing the association’s own encouragement award (this was granted for the first time in 1997), and (3) publishing a new academic journal (commonly referred to as the *Sonken Journal*; publication began in September 1994). The association was officially inaugurated at the general meeting in October 1993.

Below, an overview of the future direction of its research will be given based on a general synopsis of trends in the research interests found at Sonken (including both the Society for Rural Studies and its successor association, the Japanese Association for Rural Studies). In addition, it will also offer up a message to the world by discussing the implications of and future challenges inherent in earthquake disasters as seen from Sonken's perspective based on its experiences with the Great East Japan Earthquake of 3.11.

2. Trends in Sonken's Research Topics

Rural areas in Japan have found themselves buffeted by various different changes that have accompanied the eras. Two catalysts in particular that spurred these drastic changes in the environment surrounding Japan's rural areas were the agrarian reforms in the post-World-War-II period and the rapid economic growth that followed these. Up until that point in Japan semi-feudalistic socioeconomic relationships had taken shape amidst a social structure in which the landowning classes owned the majority of agrarian land. Under the land reforms instituted during the US occupation (the main thrust of which was the democratization of rural societies), most of the tenanted lands were allocated out to tenant farmers. As a result, Japanese agricultural structures got a fresh start as farms owned by small farm families under a system of geographically dispersed plots owned by multiple people. The rapid economic growth that came after this produced population outflows from agricultural villages to urban areas, as well as mixed urban-rural settlement patterns in agricultural villages adjacent to urban areas and depopulation in mountainous agricultural villages, thus drastically transforming conventional homes and villages. Moreover, agriculture, which was the core industry in rural areas, was at the mercy of the agricultural policies that were implemented from time to time in any number of different ways. Policy initiatives that were promoted included collective cultivation, cooperative organizations, cutting production of paddy field rice, and regional promotion policies, to which rural areas were forced to mount a variety of responses.

It was the far-reaching establishment of landed farmers through these sorts of postwar agrarian reforms and the changes to the structure of agricultural villages that formed the historical backdrop under which Sonken was originally established as a research association. Thereafter as well, the influence of agricultural policies and the vicissitudes of the Japanese economy continued to have a major impact on the existing structures of rural areas in agricultural, mountain, and fishing villages. Of course, the regional and historical characteristics of each rural area also cast long shadows in this, and so Sonken was constantly paying attention to what sorts of qualities these traditional Japanese families (*ie*¹) and villages (*mura*) had and what sorts of transformations they were undergoing. In this sense, the themes that were taken up by Sonken developed in a manner that is indivisible from the circumstances of their respective ages.

¹ According to Fukutake, *ie* is characterized as “the continuing entity, perpetuated, in principle by patrilineal descent, from ancestors to descendants, an entity of which the family group at any one time is only the current concrete manifestation.” (Fukutake 1967: 39)



Picture 1. Transplanting of Rice Seedling (1957)

Source) *Shashin Monogatari, Showa no Kurashi 1 Noson* (Rural Life in Showa era), Nosan Gyoson Bunka Kyokai, 2004, Photo taken by Jun'ichiro Tamura in Iwate town, Iwate prefecture in 1957.

Now then, what sorts of trends are there when it comes to the research interests of the Japanese Association for Rural Studies? We can get a grasp of their subject matter by tracing back the trends in the theme sessions (shared themes) from each year's meeting.² Since the meeting's theme sessions were largely reflected in the *Annual Report* from the following year, we can interpret these as being the same as the themes taken up by this report.

TAKAHASHI Akiyoshi (2007) pointed out that the changeover in Sonken's research subjects could be seen as coincidentally corresponding to the changes in the publishers of Sonken's annual reports. The publishing firms issuing the annual report have changed four times, from the initial Jicho-sha Co., Ltd. to Hanawashobo Co., Ltd. and Ochanomizu Shobo Co., Ltd., and finally to the current Rural Culture Association Japan. He traced back Sonken's major themes from each of these periods, and has indicated the following points.

In the first period (Jicho-sha [1953–1964]), he posits that a perspective that attempted to understand the villages and their way of life from inside the agricultural villages prevailed, with

² In addition, the 30-year anniversary symposium (published in *Research News*), the 50-year anniversary symposium (published in *Sonken Journal*), and so on are also useful as reference literature for tracing back through the history of Sonken's research.

this including the characteristics and structures of agricultural villages following the agrarian reforms, as well as rural community and family (*ie*) alliance theory. Moreover, upon reaching the final stages of this period, the changes in agricultural villages that were brought about by the Agricultural Basic Act and the rapid economic growth came to be the focus of research.



Picture 2. Harvesting Wheat Using Machinery (2010)

Note) Photo taken by Dr. Hideki YOSHINO in Hanamaki city, Iwate prefecture in July 2010.

In the second period (Hanawashobo [1965–1974]) there were discussions over how Sonken should consider the changes engendered by the differentiation of the peasant classes, urbanization, and agricultural administration under the Basic Act, with the dissolution of villages taken up as a common subject. As dependency upon capitalist development was progressing, questions were raised about whether rural areas could actually serve as core constituents responsible for autonomous and voluntary development. The claim could be made that establishing such themes resulted in the following secondary effects. In other words, its discussions over the dissolution of the very rural areas that constitute Sonken's identity and which are its research subjects provided it with an opportunity to explore new research directions.

During the third period (Ochanomizu Shobo Co., Ltd. [1975–1987]) and the first stages of its publication by the Rural Culture Association Japan [1988–1990] debates were carried out that

reconceptualized the effects produced by capitalism within agricultural villages, including subjects like “Japanese Capitalism and the Traditional Family (*Ie*)” and “Changes in and the Present State of Agricultural Village Life.” As part of this, SHIMAZAKI Minoru took up the “livelihood disruption” caused by the Annaka pollution case, which is an issue that must be considered as a visual lens with which to take a second look at the modern day with its experiences from the Great East Japan Earthquake. The agency of the rural villagers to oppose the impacts of capitalism was also discussed, and “Agricultural Village Autonomy” and “Agricultural Village Planning” were set as shared themes thereafter.

The fourth period (Rural Culture Association Japan [1990–present]) has been evaluated as a period in which rapid forward progress was seen in the diversification and expansion of Sonken’s themes. More specifically, the themes here include environmental problems, international comparisons, gender, agricultural village welfare, the post-productivism, the organic farming movement, entrepreneurialism, education, green tourism, damage from wildlife, and municipal consolidation. The titles of the annual reports from recent years (over the past ten years) have been listed for reference (see Table).

Table Titles of the Annual Bulletin of Rural Studies (2003–2012)

Volume	Title	Year
39	Constructing Research Frameworks for the Analysis of the 21st Century Rural Society	2003
40	The Rise of Part-time Farming and its Sustainability in Rural East Asia in 21st Century	2004
41	Consumed Rurality: “New Rural Problems” in the Post-Productivist Era	2005
42	Education Embedded in Community and Agriculture	2006
43	New Developments of Green Tourism in Rural Japan: Urban-Rural Exchanges as a Strategy to Revitalize Farming Areas	2007
44	Community in Early Modern Village Society: A Reappraisal Probing the Roots of Village Society in Japan, Europe and Asia	2008
45	Renewing Japan’s Rural Hamlets: The Real Situation in Remote Mountainous Areas and Islands and Practical Policy Suggestions	2009
46	Rethinking Damage from Wildlife: Cultural Approaches in Rural Life	2010
47	The Common Use and Management of the Urban Resources on the Basis of the “Village System”	2011
48	Aiming to Change Rural Society: from the Perspective of Gender Relations	2012

The body of research that Sonken has accumulated in this fashion has also been published in a manner whereby the texts have been edited with beginning students in mind. Namely, these include *Studies on Village Communities* (edited by the Japanese Association for Rural Studies with TORIGOE Hiroyuki as Presiding Editor) and *Studies on Village Resources* (edited by the Japanese Association for Rural Studies with IKEGAMI Koichi as Presiding Editor; both of these were published in 2007 by the Rural Culture Association Japan). The expansion in Sonken-related studies as of this point in time can be understood from a look at these texts.

As Takahashi (2007) pointed out, Sonken’s history consists of it having repeatedly engaged in methodological examinations based on which it has worked out new research directions. By

achieving new growth and development through such methodological examinations it has continued to maintain its dynamism. The fact that it has increased its number of young members could also be said to be evidence of this. Moving forward, Sonken must continue to pose questions over what sorts of research fields it can expand into while capitalizing upon its accumulated body of research.

3. Distribution of the Interests of Sonken’s Members

As was mentioned above, Sonken is unique in that its members approach their shared research subject of rural areas from an interdisciplinary perspective that includes economics, history, and sociology. Since “Discipline,” “Target research region,” and “Target research domain” were listed in the membership roster published in 2012, a general look at the distribution of the research interests of Sonken’s members would reveal the following (multiple responses were allowed for all of these).

First off, for “Discipline” 70% of its members chose sociology, followed by economics, anthropology (or ethnographic studies), and history (Figure 1).

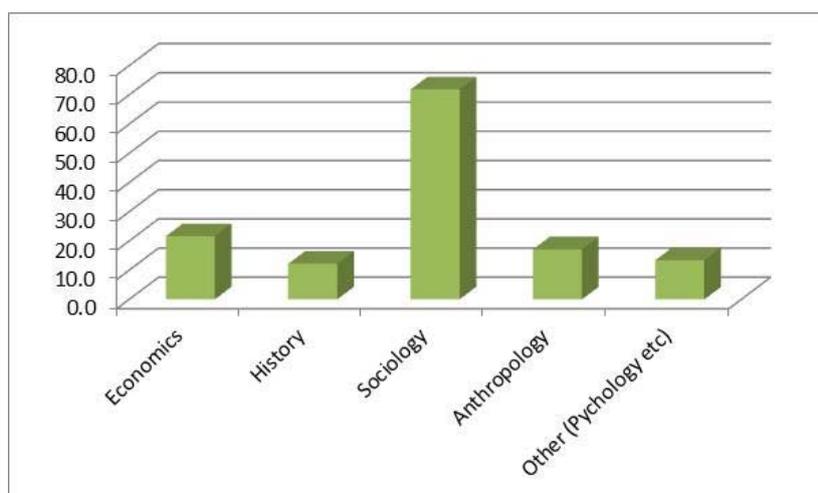


Figure 1. Disciplines of Sonken members (multiple responses allowed)
Data) 2012 Members' Directory

Next, from a look at “Target research region” it stands to reason that many of the researchers take agricultural villages within Japan as their field of research. Yet it can also be surmised from this that among its members there is particularly high interest in studying mountainous areas within Japan in particular (Figure 2). Mountainous areas are undergoing an ongoing process of becoming marginal settlements as a result of the aging of their populations and depopulation (Ohno 2005), and such regions present a collection of themes for which there is a high degree of urgency. This is thought to account for this interest in studying them. From mountainous areas a downward trend can be observed in the number of members who take up other target research regions in the order of plains areas, suburban areas, and fishing communities and islands. What is

more, research on rural areas in other countries is also a comparatively large area of interest among Sonken members. Its members have made particularly significant contributions in studies on rural areas in Asia (including South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia, etc.). For Asia, the Asian Rural Sociological Association (ARSA) was established in 1996, and has already held four meetings (its meetings are generally held once every four years). The expectation for the future is that a network of researchers on agricultural villages in Asia will take shape. After Asia, the next largest overseas research region is Europe. Europe has attracted research interest owing to the fact that it is rife with implications for Japan from such perspectives as the position of farmers and rural areas within an industrialized society and the advanced state of its agricultural policies.

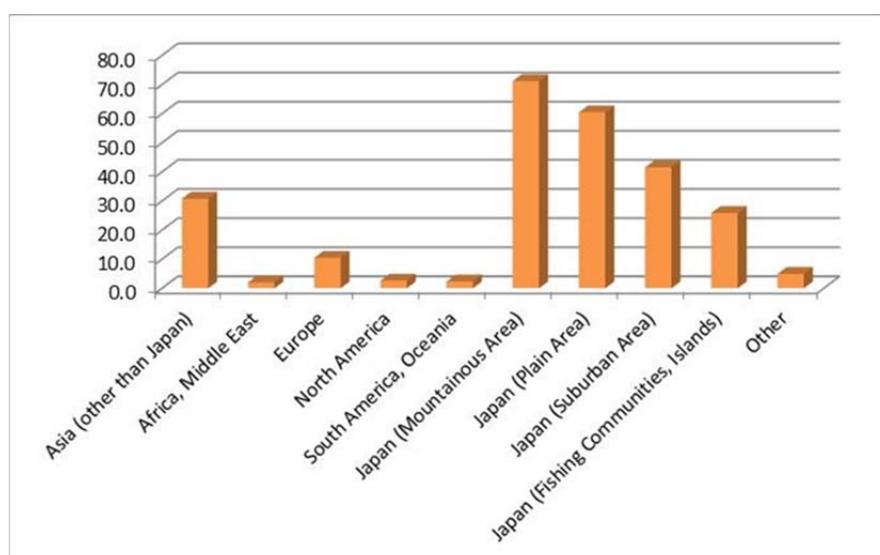


Figure 2. Distribution of target research regions (multiple responses allowed) Data) 2012 Members' Directory

Lastly, a broad overview will be provided of the “Target research domains” that have attracted the interest of Sonken’s members (Figure 3). Naturally of course, there is a high level of interest in villages and local societies, but it was also learned that aside from these, interest in social consciousness and behavior is also widely shared. In addition, rural family and culture are garnering attention, as are the environment and organic farming. In the subject of family, research on both rural areas and traditional family (*ie*)/villages (*mura*) has continued to be fundamental themes at Sonken. Furthermore, research on rural culture is an area that serves as research on the various customs, performing arts, and other facets of rural areas. The interest of researchers on rural areas in the environment has led to a rethink of the mechanisms for managing local resources that have traditionally been erected by rural areas, and has produced a variety of suggestions for the field of environmental sociology. In addition, it could also be said that there is relatively high interest in subjects like farmer’s associations, gender, and policies.

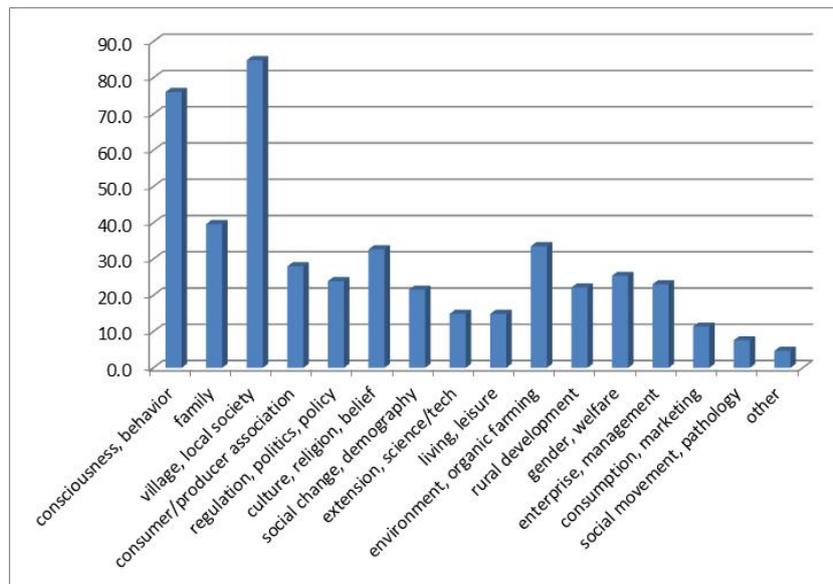


Figure 3. Distribution of targeted research domains (multiple responses allowed)
Data) 2012 Members' Directory

4. Future Research Directions and Prospects

What sorts of prospects can be envisioned for the direction of Sonken's research in the future? At the meeting commemorating the 50-year anniversary of Sonken (2002), the direction for its research that was presented by KUMAGAI Sonoko, one of its member, can be thought of as offering useful perspectives still today (Kumagai 2004). Namely, the first perspective is, "When it comes to the units of agricultural management and the structural units and groups in communities in rural areas, it is no longer possible to adopt the premise that people permanently reside in fixed regions" (a perspective of migration rather than permanent residency; and one of individuals rather than groups). The second perspective is, "In analyses of agricultural management, agricultural labor, and farm life, problems and domains have arisen that cannot be covered by using productivity (improving productivity) alone as a yardstick" (perspective of shifting to sustainability rather than the principle of productivity). The third perspective that was proposed for the direction that studies on rural areas should head hereafter in the 21st century is, "It is no longer possible to grasp the local communities of rural areas as a single, cohesive whole" (a perspective of comprehensive views rather than being locally endemic (fixed)).

In this manner, Sonken continues to take up topics that reassess its results and methodologies thus far at its theme sessions in response to the times, as Sonken's domain has been redefined and it has searched for themes in this new era. It is believed that this sort of process of questioning anew the research themes on rural areas and methodological self-reflection has been meaningful in terms of Sonken's continued existence as an association.

The year 2012 marks the 60-year anniversary since Sonken was established, making this the year when it reached its 60th birthday, to put it in human terms. Using this as an opportunity, plans were taken into consideration to reconsider the question of how the legacies of our

predecessors can be put to use in the future. The socioeconomic environment surrounding rural areas is undergoing enormous changes, and Japanese society as a whole is approaching an age in which it will seek out new social configurations on the impetus provided by the Great East Japan Earthquake. In the midst of all this, questions are being raised about how to pass down the research results that Sonken has amassed to the future while also connecting these up to other research domains.

As for Sonken's characteristics of setting rural areas as its specific target domain and approaching these in an interdisciplinary manner, this cooperation across disciplines has been built into the fabric of the association, on top of which this framework has persisted for the long time span of 60 years. So in this sense it could be claimed that these in themselves have been extremely valuable scholarly endeavors. Assessments of whether or not the initial vision for comprehensive research from the time of Sonken's founding has been achieved will be left to the judgment of each researcher. But the hope is that it will further expand the scope of its cooperation with other disciplines, including sociology, agricultural economics, and history, in order to break new ground in the future as well.

5. The Great East Japan Earthquake as a "Rural Disaster": Post-3.11 Challenges

The massive earthquake that struck East Japan on March 11, 2011 exposed Japan to a compound disaster that was accompanied by a tsunami and a nuclear accident. Agricultural and fishing villages made up the regions that suffered particularly serious damage due to this recent disaster. For the association, which has set its sights on Japan's rural areas in its research, the accumulated body of its research to date was tested and said that research will be involved in some manner or other with the activities geared towards the regions' reconstruction and recovery for a long time to come in the future. Having said that, the fact that conventional academic associations that study rural areas do not have all that much experience with addressing such earthquakes, tsunamis, and nuclear accidents head-on is one that must be acknowledged. The question now is how will rural areas respond when they are confronted with crises in the form of natural disasters or man-made calamities, and how will such functions be exhibited, suspended, and altered? It is hoped that a great deal of research will continue to be performed in the future from the perspective of rural area studies on answering this question.

Originally, to the people who live in agricultural and fishing villages, disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis have existed within their memories of the past over the course of lives that span multiple generations. The majority of the regions that experienced this recent tsunami also experienced tsunamis during the Meiji (1896) and Showa (1933) Eras. Or if one were to trace this back 1,000 years into the past it would become apparent that the people back then also experienced tsunamis that were at a similar scale as these. Yet sometimes past experiences that are engraved in history and geological stratum surpass human life cycles and the wisdom passed down in rural areas is neglected over the course of social changes. When this happens we end up once again encountering the hardships that our predecessors faced.

In this manner, many regions are repeatedly assailed by tsunamis time and again. But in such

cases, why do people return to tsunami-prone villages? Ueda and Torigoe (2012) explain this phenomena in the following manner based upon a survey in the Sanriku Region (Kesenuma City). Namely, that people’s way of thinking forms the backdrop for their returning to sites that have experienced tsunamis. In other words, such people live together with the sea—in which abundance and calamity have existed together as two sides of the same coin—and therefore this way of thinking among the people has taken shape there and persists. As people have lived amidst nature, which can induce fear and anxiety in us while also bestowing us with abundance, generation after generation has passed in which people go about giving rise to social order and cultivating beliefs. Yet the fact of the matter is that this social order can still be shaken.

The communities in rural areas have been comprised of close, collective ties designed to surmount such disasters, but the challenges currently surrounding these communities (such as the aging of their populations, depopulation, and municipal mergers) have been serving to weaken all of these sorts of close, collective ties.



Picture 3. Destroyed Villages and Paddy Fields by Tsunami Disaster (2011)

Note) Photo taken by Dr. Hideki YOSHINO in Tanohata village, Iwate prefecture in May 2011.

This is a phenomenon that has been observed across Japanese society as a whole, yet the fact that the agricultural and fishing village regions that were struck by this recent tsunami are regions in which this depopulation and aging of their populations is particularly advanced cannot be

ignored. The enormous disaster of 3.11 was a disaster that assailed agricultural and fishing villages that are confronted with this reality, and many of the casualties (nearly 70%) were elderly people. This fact provides a graphic accounting of the circumstances mentioned above.

The accident at the nuclear power plant that occurred immediately after the earthquake evoked memories of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in people around the world and shocked many. However, the damage brought about by the recent accident at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi Nuclear Power Plant was a rural disaster first and foremost. Agricultural and fishing villages, which have heretofore engaged in the cyclical (integrated) use of resources centered mainly around lovely *satoyama* areas, are now being faced with complex problems such as the dispersal of radioactive materials into the environment over the long-term. Economic disparities have existed between urban and rural areas when it comes to choosing the locations for nuclear power plants, and furthermore the affects from accidents directly impact the placed-based economies of rural areas. In this sense, the challenges facing them and disasters from nuclear power plants are deeply entwined with such areas by virtue of the fact that they are rural areas. For example, Iitate Village in Fukushima Prefecture is a region that has been highly praised for its village development and beautiful agricultural village scenery. However, the entire village was forced to evacuate, and the people were no longer able to maintain their agricultural village community in the region they had been living in up until then. The people are agonizingly searching for solutions to the question of how they should go about clearing a path for Iitate's future.

Due to the contamination from radioactive materials, some agricultural producers had to strip away fertile soil that they had created through many long years of farming for the sake of decontamination, and have had planting limitations imposed on them. In addition, some fishermen also had fishing restrictions imposed on them due to the contamination of the ocean. These people have been up-rooted from the soil and seas, and are finding themselves hard-pressed both economically and psychologically. The "livelihood disruption" (Shimazaki Minoru) that occurs in agricultural regions once pollution problems have arisen in them is occurring primarily in Fukushima.

However, in regions that were not all that badly contaminated, when spring arrived there were people whose bodies sprang into motion automatically as they set about their farm work (these were mainly elderly people) (Sugeno and Hasegawa, eds. 2012). They were incited to take up their farming lifestyle and habits, and made vegetable gardens and cultivated fields. Moreover, as a result of their uncertainty over whether it was all right to let their families and grandchildren eat their produce they took it over to radiation measuring facilities that had been set up by an NGO. The results of these measurements showed that most of the rice and vegetables were at levels that were perfectly safe for consumption, and came in far below the levels that had been expected. It was discovered that the underlying reason for this was because the radioactive materials (especially cesium) were being captured by the argillaceous soil, and so for the most part they were not being absorbed by the crops. As this indicates, there is still a great deal that is unknown about the movement of radioactive materials within the environment, and there are still numerous points remaining that merit future research. The fact that local production activities and

lifestyle configurations themselves are being impacted by the movement of radioactive materials throughout the environment speaks to the fact that such studies must be promoted through collaborative research between numerous fields, including the social sciences.

Initially, before the nuclear disaster, Fukushima Prefecture had been the region that had garnered the most popularity throughout East Japan as a sought-after destination for urban-rural exchanges and migration to the countryside from city-dwellers.³ Its popularity is thought to have been derived from the fact that while it is relatively close to the Tokyo metropolitan area, it still maintains an abundance of nature and a traditional way of life. The affects produced by the nuclear accident represent a problem that is having a significant impact on exchanges and the flow of people between urban and rural areas. Regions that have attempted to promote hands-on experience with agriculture and similar experiences for children, such as by having them live and study in mountain villages, are now confronted with a huge dilemma that was instigated by the problem of radioactive materials.

This recent nuclear accident has prompted a reassessment of Japan's energy policies. Rural villages are the ones that are closest to not only nuclear power, but also to electricity supply policies in their capacity as municipalities in which the power plants are situated. Yet despite this they occupy the very farthest extremity removed from the decision making process. While Japan is in the process of searching for new energy policies, initiatives to decentralize energy demand and supply are also gaining ground. Mechanisms that will reflect the views of rural villages in the formulation of future energy policies are required. Natural energy and biomass power generation in particular have numerous points of contact when it comes to agriculture and land use. The question currently being posed is what sort of prospective outlook for the future should be adopted in coordination with the future regional development visions of rural villages and regions.

6. Conclusion

To date, the Japanese Association for Rural Studies has amassed a body of empirical research based on field studies. With respect to the various impacts wrought on Japanese society by the Great East Japan Earthquake, the association plans to continue collecting and disseminating knowledge from a field-based perspective on into the future. The impacts experienced by the Japanese agriculture, forestry, and fisheries industries and local communities from the compound disaster that they recently experienced, as well as knowledge related to their strengths and weaknesses, are undoubtedly rife with implications for contemporary agricultural and fishing villages and communities throughout the world that continue to experience a variety of different external shocks (this assumes not only natural disasters, but also shocks caused by wars, political or economic turmoil, infectious diseases, and so on). Moving forward, the hope is

³ In the 2010 "Ranking of Desirable Regions for Country Living" by the Hometown Return Support Center (an NPO corporation), Fukushima Prefecture came in first place, Nagano Prefecture came in second place, and Chiba Prefecture came in third place.

that progress will be made internationally when it comes to sharing and exchanging such experiences and knowledge.

Basic data on the association

Year established: (Society for Rural Studies) 1952, (Japanese Association for Rural Studies) 1993

Number of members: 435 (as of September 2012)

Publications:

Annual Report: Studies on Rural Societies (published by the Rural Culture Association Japan once annually)

Journal of Studies on Rural Societies (published by the Rural Culture Association Japan twice annually)

Sonken News (printed by the association's Administration office published thrice annually)

Meetings: Held once annually (in addition, regional research meetings are held as needed)

Contact Information

Association website: <http://rural-studies.jp/English/index.html>

Please refer to the above website regarding the association's organization.

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Written by: TACHIKAWA Masashi
Chair, International Affairs Committee