Hybrid Lifestyle: Analysis of the Culture of New Entrants into Agriculture

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Introduction

This article analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of three theoretical frameworks in the ethnographic study of shinki nōgyō san'nyū sha (new entrants into agriculture from non-farming families; hereafter, new entrants) in the suburbs of Tokyo, Japan\(^1\). Building off of my previous MA thesis research, I begin by reviewing the strengths and weaknesses of the theories of resistance and alternative cultures in understanding the culture of the new entrants (Osawa 2010). Next, I discuss the limits of these two theories in understanding seeming contradictions between the new entrants’ participation in both agricultural and urban lifestyles, and propose the theory of hybridity as a more nuanced way of analyzing the complex motivations and desires of new entrants.

Method

Since September 2008 I have been researching new entrants as the focus of my MA thesis (Osawa 2010) and now as the topic of my doctoral dissertation research. The farmlands they engage in are located around 50 kilometers north of downtown Tokyo and are within commuting distance to the downtown. The new entrants moved to this suburban area to enter into agriculture, and are “newcomers” to the town and the local farming community as well. In this article, for the sake of securing a representative range of informants, new entrants include both those who are self-employed and employees of agricultural corporations; however, to focus on the particular lifestyle choices and attitudes of new entrants, I have limited my informants to those who originate from non-farming families. These informants are individuals who have chosen agriculture as their main breadwinning jobs, even though they have not been expected to do so by their families as part of a family farm or business. The informants’ choice of entering agriculture places them in a marginalized industry in contemporary Japan, because agriculture is not a popular industry in terms of career choice (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Commu-
cation, Statistics Bureau 2012) and is suffering from a lack of successors (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries: MAFF 2011). Therefore, the new entrants’ lifestyle choice and moving to rural areas do not follow patterns of dominant lifestyle and job choice in contemporary Japan. In this regard, following Williams (1960: vi, 1965: 63) definition of “culture” as “a whole way of life,” new entrants can be described as choosing a “non-dominant culture.”

My research method consisted of semi-structured interviews and participant observation on farms in order to understand the motivations for new entrants in entering agriculture and to learn their “style” of agriculture. I interviewed 15 new entrants, including six self-employed and nine employed farmers. Out of the six self-employed farmers, five are male and one is female. Out of the nine employed farmers, eight are male and one is female. Their ages range from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. Out of 15 informants, five new entrants are married and have one or two children. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded into 1) nature, 2) urban, 3) rural, 4) organic farming, and 5) lifestyle for the sake of analysis.

A resistance and an alternative?

In my MA thesis, I originally analyzed new entrants’ in-migration from urban to suburban areas and their entry into agriculture as resistance to “mainstream” lifestyle choices, and I characterized their practices as a part of alternative culture in contemporary Japan (Osawa 2010). These two dimensions – resistance and alternative culture – both juxtapose a particular lifestyle choice vis-à-vis a “dominant culture.” Early studies tend to describe “non-dominant cultures” as a resistance or opposition to dominant culture. According to Williams (1973: 9), a certain society in a certain period has “a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective.” In addition to a dominant culture in a complex society, he suggests, there are simultaneously oppositional cultures and alternative cultures. The former is practiced by one who “finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light,” while the latter is practiced by a group of individuals which “simply finds a different way to live and wishes to be left alone with it” (Williams 1973: 11).

In a similar vein to Williams’ characterization of oppositional cultures and alternative cultures, Milton Yinger (1982) theorizes countercultures and alternative cultures in terms of their relationship to dominant values. For Yinger, a counterculture is defined as “a set of norms and values of a group that sharply contradict the dominant norms and values of the society of which that group is a part” (3). Focusing on the values that are espoused by the dominant culture, Yinger argues that the modes of opposition taken by countercultures are direct resistance
to dominant values and resistance toward the exchange and power structures that are based on dominant values. On the other hand, while alternative cultures may also oppose dominant values, their own values are permissible from the perspective of dominant values and do not move away from the larger cultural systems. Both of these conceptualizations of oppositional culture/counterculture and alternative cultures in terms of the larger society can be understood as what Hebdige (2002[1979]) calls subcultures. While one is oppositional and one is alternative, both can be said to express “symbolic forms of resistance” (80) against dominant values in implicit and symbolic ways.

Following these studies of non-dominant cultures, I hypothesized new entry into agriculture as resistance and an alternative to dominant lifestyle choices, which I define as taking employed positions in stable secondary or tertiary industries and emulating urban lifestyles. Despite the increasing visibility of agriculture and farming villages in the media,\(^2\) entering into agriculture as one’s primary occupation is still uncommon in Japan, and the number of new entrants both from farming families and non-farming families remains extremely low. According to the 2010 national census, the percentage of new entrants into the agricultural and forestry industries has decreased\(^3\) (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Statistics Bureau 2012). Nonetheless, against the backdrop of this decline in agriculture in Japan, the new entrants in my study have moved to the suburbs and entered into agriculture as their bread-winning jobs.

My research reveals that despite their resistance to following the lifestyle choices of the dominant culture, they are not “anti-society” or ideologically opposed to broader Japanese society. They do not criticize admirers of urban lifestyles and consumerism, nor would they mind if they were sneered at by such people. When I asked how they would respond if they were criticized by non-farmers or conventional farmers, they answered that they would not react at all but would just continue to engage in agriculture. Furthermore, being within commuting distance to downtown Tokyo, they sometimes enjoy the amenities of urban life (e.g., shopping or drinking) and visit urban areas, and many also understand the attractions of urban life and consumerism. In the end, they are just individuals who want to produce their favorite foods and consume foods that they feel are safe. Due to these lifestyle preferences they embrace a lifestyle that is different from dominant values, and this led me to hypothesize their culture as part of an alternative culture in contemporary Japan.

The ambivalence of new entrants’ own perspectives vis-à-vis mainstream lifestyles and dominant values, however, reveals several weaknesses in applying the theory of resistance and
alternative cultures to their practices. First and foremost, new entrants did not show any intentions to be “alternative” to the mainstream, even though they said that they are cynical of the mainstream lifestyle. However, as Scott (1985: 289-303) has argued, even if they do not intentionally choose to be alternative, it remains possible to categorize their practices as an “unconscious” resistance. If this is the case for new entrants, then the main issues for analysis are the consequences of their practices. Scott observes that the “everyday resistance” of peasants can result in revolutionary consequences (Scott 1985: 289-303), and so even though the resisters do not have willful intent to resist, the practice is still a resistance if the consequences result in revolutions.

In the case of my informants, however, their practices are not a threat to the practitioners of mainstream lifestyles in the cities, nor are they a threat to conventional farmers. First, for conventional local farmers, the new entrants are not primary actors promoting transformation in their farming communities. Moreover, in many ways the new entrants may be seen as the saviors of local farming communities because they rent deserted cultivated lands and maintain them. Because they have only lived in the community for at most ten years, the relationship between new entrants and local farmers is not as solid as the relationships among the local farmers themselves. However, both the local conventional farmers and the new entrants seek suitable relationships with each other, and so there is little sense of resistance or revolution between these two groups. Second, new entrants’ comments revealed that the admirers of urban lifestyles do not care what the new entrants are doing; when I asked new entrants about the reactions to their lifestyle choice by their friends and relatives, they said that they did not face criticism and the most common responses were usually limited to a disinterested reply, “Heé, assou (Well, I see).” In fact, new entrants noted that their friends and relatives were happy because they share second-ranked vegetables (those unable to be sold on the market due to superficial imperfections) with them. Indeed, it might be said that entry into agriculture by the new entrants is welcomed by both local farmers and the new entrants’ friends and relatives. In short, rather than willful resistance or even the unconscious resistance of an alternative culture, it became clear that the motivations and lifestyle choices of new entrants are in fact welcomed by their fellow farmers as well as by the majority of individuals who follow mainstream lifestyles in contemporary Japan.

**Hybridity beyond resistance**

Given the above caveats to these theories, I do not think that the practices of new entrants
can be easily categorized as either resistance or alternative cultures, even though theirs is a non-dominant lifestyle choice. Instead, I suggest that their practices be approached as a hybrid culture. In the first place, in contemporary Japanese culture it is difficult to distinguish between the “mainstream” and the “marginal.” As Ivy (1992) points out, contemporary Japanese culture is not singular but it consists of multiple cultures, and the motivations and interpretations of new entrants also make it difficult to distinguish between mainstream and marginal cultures in terms of both values and practitioners. For example, the preferences for natural or organic products or for doing agriculture as leisure activities have recently spread throughout urban and rural communities across Japan and cannot be categorized as either mainstream or marginal. While something related to agriculture and soil might have previously been evaluated as outmoded and undervalued as symbols of “backwardness” or an inability to adapt to new lifestyles, now it is praised as LOHAS or slow food. Even some companies are also entering into agriculture as a business (MAFF 2012).

In this sense, applying the distinction of alternative culture also does not make sense because the alternative can exist only with the premise of the existence of the mainstream and the marginal. Thus, the mainstream and the marginal themselves are merely alternatives to each other, both subsumed within a broader dominant culture—or rather, “cultures,” to borrow from Ivy (1992). Furthermore, if the distinction between the marginal and mainstream becomes ambiguous as it is in a complex society like contemporary Japan, I believe that it is necessary to analyze the cultures without hierarchizing them. As Bhabha (1994) suggests, the multiplicities of cultures should be presumed instead of the unifications, and the introduction of the concept of the “hybrid” enables us to analyze cultures without assigning one as mainstream and the other as marginal. In the age of “micromasses” (Ivy 1992: 253), applying “hybridity” to describe contemporary cultural forms is more valid for understanding the complexities of the various cultures involved.

Hybridity 1: Their style of practice

One of the reasons that the new entrants have begun agriculture is anxiety over food safety. New entrants explain that they do not want their family members, especially their children, to consume agricultural products with chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Before they began farming, they used to purchase organic food available on the market. However, they did not trust the organic food certified by the Japan Agricultural Standard (JAS). They note that JAS’s definition of “organic food” permits the use of several fertilizers and pesticides that are
made from “natural ingredients” (MAFF 2009), but they cannot be certain that these products are safe for one’s health. Therefore, one way that they can be certain about the safety of their family’s diet is to produce trustworthy products by themselves by selecting pesticides and fertilizers that they have verified themselves or by not using them at all. In these ways, we can say that their style of practice lies in-between the style of commune movements, which secludes one from broader society and associated risks, and the style of countercultures and social movements that intend to transform broader society or the particular risks within society. Neither retreating from broader society nor actively working against it, the new entrants are simply engaging in agriculture in their own style and they distribute or sell their products to the local community. They understand that their influence is limited; however, they are satisfied with this limitation. They maintain that actual practice is more essential than merely criticizing society and doing nothing.

Crucially, the new entrants do not work hard in order to increase their income or to dogmatically pursue an ideology. For example, the new entrants’ eco-consciousness is not ideological enough to motivate them to change their lifestyle into a completely “premodern” style. The new entrants certainly have high eco-consciousness; however, they put it into practice in a moderate way. They prefer to remain a part of contemporary society by protecting the environment as much as they can, rather than to advocate a return to a lifestyle without electricity or reliable water supply. What they emphasize is sustainability. For example, one informant saves electricity by unplugging electrical appliances when they are not in use. As they emphasized to me, they do as much as they can, saving energy and water within the limits of everyday life. In short, instead of going to extremes, new entrants choose a moderate lifestyle in the contemporary world.

**Hybridity 2: Their connection with society**

The new entrants are not hermits or ascetics who reject the benefits of contemporary society. In fact, their practice is based on those benefits, as it would be difficult for them to actualize their entry into farming without the development of modern infrastructure, especially that of information and communication technology (ICT) and transportation systems. Thanks to Japan’s well-developed infrastructure that integrates both urban and agricultural areas, new entrants are able to maintain human relationships as much as they had before beginning their farming lifestyle. They can visit their relatives and friends by using railways and highways and communicate with them by using the Internet. They are also able to participate in cultures dif-
fused from urban areas by using the Internet or by traveling to the cities. While they do not enthusiastically embrace ICT or transportation systems in their daily lives, they do not avoid using them.

New entrants are also pragmatic in that they are able to find a compromise between their dreams and the reality of farming. One new entrant explained that his dream is to engage in agriculture in a genkai shiraku (marginal village), which is suffering from aging residents and depopulation and where it is difficult to maintain the rice paddy and vegetable fields. Other new entrants dreamed of managing their agriculture self-sufficiently by preparing compost and poultry manure by themselves and gathering vegetable seeds from their products. However, they also realize that it is difficult for them to realize their dreams while supporting their families. New entrants must be able to earn enough income to support their family members, and they particularly worry about being able to afford the high cost of education and school expenses for their children. To earn enough income they need to make a “hybrid choice” that balances their agricultural dreams with the practical needs of their families. Therefore, they have chosen to engage in agriculture in the suburbs because there are markets where they can sell their products, and their children can attend school nearby. They still choose to maintain a connection with society, whether they like it or not, but at the same time they are also able to realize their preference to work in nature by farming and living in the suburbs.

**Conclusion**

This article has analyzed the weaknesses of applying theories of resistance and alternative cultures to the case of new entrants into agriculture from non-farming families in Japan, and has tested the validity of hybridity as a more compelling theory. I have argued that the implicit demonstration of their will in following a non-dominant lifestyle, their pursuit of a safe and natural “human” lifestyle, the mobility between urban and rural areas, the style of their practices, their connection with society, and their non-ideological way of opposing dominant lifestyles reveals the hybridity of new entrants. This has important implications for rethinking conceptualizations of culture as bound within a particular society. As Ferguson and Gupta (1992) criticize, culture is frequently discussed under the premise of a connection with certain locations. For example, Japanese culture is located inside Japan’s national borders, and Chinese culture is located within China’s. However, as Ong (2005a; 2005b) indicates, throughout their lives people move to several places and cultivate new cultures there. In other words, similar to Ferguson (2006)’s insight, cultures are mobile, carried along with individuals to their destination
and mixed with local cultures, and thus distinctions based on location become ambiguous. Furthermore, the attempt to draw distinctions is always an artificial process. As Rosaldo (1989: 217) instructs:

In the present postcolonial world, the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable, except perhaps as a "useful fiction" or a revealing distortion. In retrospect, it appears that only a concerted disciplinary effort could maintain the tenuous fiction of a self-contained cultural whole. Following the insights of postcolonial thinkers, I also focus more on the dynamics and multiplicity of culture. By doing so, I believe that anthropology can contribute more to describing contemporary cultures. In addition, the notion of dynamics enables us to describe the cultural turns within particular societies, introducing a diachronic perspective to the study of contemporary cultures. Focusing too much on the political aspect of culture can fall into the trap of describing only one side of the culture and reifying the boundaries of the actors involved. Even though non-dominant cultures may not cohesively or intentionally progress to cultural turns, and sometimes they may be completely absorbed by the dominant culture (Hebdige 2002[1979]: 94-6), if we accept that culture is dynamic then there is a possibility that broader cultural values and practices will transform into a different form. Therefore, I believe it is necessary to include the perspective of change across the various cultural values and practices within a society instead of making distinctions between mainstream, marginal, or alternative cultures. Moreover, the introduction of a diachronic perspective will avoid reifying and reinforcing the boundaries of non-dominant/dominant or the resisting/the resisted. To this end, I offer the concept of the hybridity of culture for describing cultures beyond rigid disciplinary paradigms and for understanding the complex motivations and experiences of individuals whose lives are not contained within clear boundaries.

Notes

(1) According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan (MAFF), shinkō nōgyō san’nyū sha (新規農業参入者: new entrants into agriculture) are defined as a subcategory of new farmers (新規就農者) who originate from non-farming families (MAFF n.d.a). As a broader category, the "new farmers" category includes new farmers originating from both farming families and non-farming families. One major difference between new farmers from farming families and new entrants is the preparation of farmlands and farming equipment. For new farmers it is not necessary to prepare farmlands and farming equipment because they are already prepared by their parents or grandparents. For new entrants, however, this preparation is the most critical issue. Furthermore, farming is typically a family business (MAFF 2012) and is generally inherited in Japan. Therefore, it is uncommon for individuals from non-farming families to enter
into agriculture. However, because of a lack of successors and the expansion of non-plowed farmlands, MAFF is promoting individuals from non-farming families and companies in the secondary and tertiary industries to enter into agriculture (MAFF n.d.b).

(2) Examples of the increasing interest in farming villages in the media include a TV show called Inaka ni Tomarou (Let’s Stay in the Countryside), which aired from 2003 to 2010 on TV Tokyo, and a monthly magazine called Inaka Gurashi no Hon (The Country Living Book) issued by Takarajima Sha since 1987.

(3) Following the revision of the Japan Standard Industrial Classification in 2012, the statistics for agriculture and the forestry industry have been combined under the same category (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, Statistics Bureau 2007). This is further evidence of the decline of both agricultural and forestry industries in Japan.

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