

# Political and Economic Influences on the Social Construction of Japanese Paddy Fields:

Sacred and Moral, an Asset and Production, and Beauty

YOTSUMOTO Yukio

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## Abstract

This study takes the theoretical orientation of social constructionist approach to look at how meanings of Japanese paddy fields have changed. The structural factors of political and economic forces are taken into account to explain the changes. In the pre-modern Japan, paddy fields were viewed as sacred by the nobility and morality by commoners. After World War II, paddy fields were viewed as an asset in urban areas and production in rural areas. Recently, as World Trade Organization (WTO) demands the liberalization of farm products, the Japanese government and farmers in rural areas began to see paddy fields as beauty to promote green tourism which is considered to be a strategy for survival.

## 要 約

本研究は、日本の水田の意味がどのように変化してきたかを現象学的アプローチを用いて分析する。また、変化をもたらすものとして政治・経済の構造的要因を考慮に入れる。近代以前の日本では水田は貴族階級にとっては聖なるものであり、民衆にとっては道徳と密接なつながりを持っていた。第二次世界大戦後、都市部では水田は資産であるとみなされるようになり、農村地域では生産と結びついた。近年、世界貿易機関が農産物の自由化を要求している状況で、日本政府と農村地域の農家は水田を美として捉え始めた。水田を美と捉える事によってグリーン・ツーリズムを推進していくことは日本農業そして農村地域の生存戦略の一環と考えることができる。

**Key words** : Japanese Paddy Fields, Social Construction of Landscape, The Imperial System, Folk Tales, Green Tourism

キーワード：日本の水田、景観の社会的構成、皇室システム、民間伝承、グリーン・ツーリズム

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## Introduction

**Spring** Farmers finished planting paddies. Paddies come out from the water a little bit. The field is like a pond. In quiet days, the water reflects green mountains and the blue sky. It is a serene scene. Tadpoles are swimming.

**Summer** The paddies grow. We cannot see the reflection of surrounding landscape on the water anymore. The field is filled with green paddies. They grew a lot. Sometimes, wind blows the field. The paddies move like waves. Tadpoles became frogs. They buzz all the time.

**Fall** The paddies turn to yellow. When sun is up, the paddies shine to golden color. The top of the paddies hang down because of the weight of rice. Wind is a little bit cold. It is a time for farmers to harvest.

**Winter** The field is empty. The farmers have already harvested the rice. The field is dry. The soil is hard. The remain of paddies come out from the soil. The sky is silver. It is a time to rest for farmers and the soil.

This is a nostalgic description of seasons in a Japanese paddy field which is created based on an account by an aged Japanese man living in rural Japan, whom I interviewed. He attaches the feeling of peace in mind and Japanese beauty to paddy fields. Like his account, Japanese paddy fields provoke feelings and meanings to Japanese people.

In this paper, I have two purposes. The first objective is theoretical; I would like to show the utility of bringing the political and economic factors into social

constructionist approaches in understanding Japanese paddy fields. Social constructionist approaches tend to minimize materialistic factors by emphasizing agency. However, when we look at social phenomena in a long-term span, materialistic factors such as economy cannot be overlooked as historians have demonstrated. The second objective is substantial; I want to describe changes in the meaning of Japanese paddy fields. The meaning changed over time in relation to social transformations. Three meanings of Japanese paddy fields are proposed here<sup>1)</sup>. First, it is described as sacred and moral. Japanese paddy fields were strongly tied to the political institutions of the pre-modern era. Second, it is described as an asset and production. Rapid economic growth and affluence in society made an economic factor a prime determinant of the meaning of Japanese rice fields. Third, it is described as beauty. As the international pressure of trade liberalization threatens Japanese agriculture, the value of Japanese paddies as beauty was created. Japanese paddies as beauty was bolstered by the growing interest in green tourism which brought many tourists. It rationalized the maintenance of Japanese paddies as a cultural product. In order to highlight the meanings of paddy fields, I will use variety of sources such as folk tales and information from the government and agricultural cooperatives. The analysis of these sources is an effective way to understand the symbolic meaning of rice fields.

## **Theoretical Foundation for the Analysis-Social Construction of Landscape**

The importance of symbolic meaning in studying society and human behavior is derived from theoretical perspectives of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. These perspectives emphasize actors' volition, that is, they emphasize agency. They are in contrast to the deterministic conception of

society and human behavior. In symbolic interactionism, individuals are active participants of their own world in which they interpret, evaluate and define their situation and take action accordingly. They are not passive individuals whose actions are determined by physical or social structure. In the social constructionist perspective, realities are socially constructed through the process of individuals' action and interaction. Realities are not fixed because they are created through the negotiation of actors.

Kollock and O'Brien (1994) summarize Blumer's three premises in symbolic interactionism. The first premise is that humans act toward things based on the meaning they assign to them. The second premise is that meanings are socially derived, which is to say that meaning is not inherent in the state of nature, which indicates that there is no absolute meaning. Meaning is negotiated through interaction with others. The third premise is that the perception and interpretation of social symbols are modified by the individual's own thought process. These premises can be applied to physical environments. For example, paddy fields are more than just land for Japanese. It carries cultural meanings; throughout Japan, there are festivals related to rice cultivation. Also, the meaning of rice fields is not fixed; they change through negotiations by various groups or by the modification of individuals' thought processes. The modification may occur when the individual has a new experience.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) offer another interpretation of symbolic meaning in physical environments. They argue that people live in a reality of the world of everyday life which is taken-for-granted. Thus, they do not question the reality surrounding them. It is there and people know it. Berger and Luckmann answer the questions of "What is real? How is one to know? (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 1)" by using three key concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Externalization is a process in which

individuals create their social world through activity. The social world is thus a human product. Objectivation is a process in which individuals begin to see the social world as a reality independent of human beings. It attains the status of *sui generis*, that is, the reification of social worlds. Internalization is a process in which individuals are socialized into reality. Thus, social worlds are social construction.

When we apply Berger and Luckmann's theory to natural environments, the definitions of natural environments do not arise from their inherent nature. For example, a mountain can be seen as a source of income for loggers. The mountain is a valuable resource for them. In contrast, for eco-tourists, the mountain is a source of respect for nature. The untamed mountain itself is a natural wonder. Thus, it is their construction of realities which see the mountain as a resource or respect. The social constructionist approach to natural environments is summarized by Greider and Garkovich as follows:

Cultural groups use symbols to define the natural environment and fit into their ongoing, everyday, taken-for-granted worlds within which they organize both their relationships to each other and their relationships with the environment. The natural environment is transformed through symbols and concepts that organize people's relationships in the social world (Greider and Garkovich 1994: 8).

The natural environment is socially constructed through ongoing negotiations of the situation by groups of people who are equipped with cultural symbols and language. The socially constructed meanings of landscape then confront the groups of people as reified and taken-for-granted reality. No matter how people feel the natural environment as an external and coercive fact, they are socially constructed. This means that the meaning of the natural environment changes as people's definitions of situation change. Also, the

meanings of the natural environment differ as people see it differently. When people encounter new experiences, sometimes, the taken-for-grantedness is questioned. On that occasion, people start to renegotiate the meaning of the natural environment as it fits to their new situation.

Symbolic interactionists and social constructionists are often criticized because of its micro oriented analysis and underestimation of material base. The latter criticism is important because actor's choice is constrained by structural forces. People do not create the unlimited number of realities of social world. Influenced by structural forces, the realities of social world are converged on limited numbers of social meanings. Although, the structural forces circumscribe actor's choice, they can also become a catalyst for change in the social construction of reality. When economic and political changes impact on people's daily life, people start to question their taken-for-grantedness and thus they begin to negotiate their situations. Here, although structural forces constrain people's life, our lives are not determined by these forces. This means that we cannot predict what kind of definition of the situation will emerge. People have agency to define the situation. Therefore, although I acknowledge the constraining nature, determinism is rejected. In this paper, I attempt to minimize weaknesses of social constructionists and symbolic interactionists. The symbolic meaning of paddy fields is analyzed in consideration with structural forces such as economy and policy. I argue that, by accounting for external forces in the analysis, changes in the symbolic meaning of rice fields can be understood more comprehensively.

Japanese paddy fields were long thought as a root of sacredness and morality. To see rice fields as sacred and moral was taken-for-granted in people's everyday life. However, when Japan experienced modernization and when it was gradually integrated into the international market economy, the negotiation and

renegotiation of the meaning of paddy fields took place. People started to question the taken-for-grantedness of the meaning in paddy fields. The situations required the actors to negotiate the meaning. Through the negotiation and renegotiation, new meanings of paddy fields emerged. In urban areas, the paddy fields are viewed as an asset. In rural areas, initially, it was viewed as a site for production. More recently, as the international market economy threatens Japanese farmers, it is viewed as beauty. In these changes of the meaning of rice fields, the state took significant role. Sometimes, it acted as the definer of the meaning in order to maintain order in society or to protect the agricultural sector from foreign threats. Thus, the state is an important actor for social construction of paddy fields in conjunction with or through directing people.

### **Paddy Fields as Sacred and Moral**

Since the Yayoi era, rice production has become the important part of Japanese society. Before the era, Japan was a hunting-gathering society. After the introduction of wet-rice agriculture from Korea, Japanese society gradually transformed into an agricultural society. The development of rice agriculture and the imperial system were closely associated with each other. Ojin emperor established Yamato state in the fourth century A.D., which was the beginning of the imperial system in Japan. The state was based on rice production; its economic and political system were constructed around rice agriculture. Taxes were paid with rice and religious ceremonies which assured good harvest of rice were equal to political ceremonies (See Ohnuki-Tierney 1993 for more detail about the relationship between rice agriculture and the imperial system in Japan).

The politico-religious ceremonies in the imperial system created the sacredness of rice fields. Since it was inseparable between rice production and the imperial system, the creation of the imperial system as sacred and the promotion of emperors as God influenced the construction of sacredness in rice fields. One of the imperial ceremonies still conducted is *Onamesai* which involves a planting-harvest ritual. *Onamesai* has two occasions to conduct the ceremony. In spring, two sacred fields are chosen for planting rice by divination. Rice in the fields is grown and waits for the fall ceremony. When rice is growing, fields are protected from impurity with great care. The fall ceremony is a ritual of harvest with four components. First, the emperor celebrates the rejuvenation of the soul. Then, the emperor offers new crops of rice to the Deity. Third, the emperor and the Deity become commensal. Finally, the emperor hosts a feast (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). *Onamesai* is an imperial ceremony which links the sacredness of the emperor and rice agriculture. The paddy fields as sacred were socially constructed by the upper rank of Japanese associated with the imperial system.

How about common people? Did they see paddy fields as sacred like the imperial and noble families saw it? Based on the reading of Japanese folk tales, I would say that commoners saw paddy fields as moral instead of sacred. This was probably due to the imperial system's limited influence on Japanese society. After the 12th Century, the real power rested in subsequent military governments. Although, the imperial system was not demolished by the military governments, the imperial system was largely confined to Kyoto and did not have ability to exert substantial power throughout Japan. The influence of the imperial system on common people was minimal. Thus, the social construction of rice fields as sacred did not affect common people's construction of its meaning. Commoners constructed the reality of paddy fields separated from the



imperial system. Their social construction of it was the reality as moral. Let me introduce several folk tales to illustrate common people's construction of rice fields as moral.

*Folk tale 1. The Rice Field the Monkey and the Pheasant Cultivated*

The monkey and pheasant planted a rice field together. The pheasant went to it every day, but when he asked the monkey to go with him, he only made excuses and would not go. When it was time for the harvest, the monkey went for the first time. He took one bundle and the pheasant took one. Then the monkey took one more. The pheasant protested, but the monkey would not listen. The pheasant went home with only one third. After the monkey ate all his, he went to the pheasant's home to take what was there. That the chestnut, the crab, the mortar, and the egg helped the pheasant punish the monkey makes it like "The battle between the monkey and the crab." (Yanagita 1986: 301)

This folk tale and similar folk tales are found in five prefectures in northern Japan and one prefecture in southern Japan. These prefectures are famous for agricultural production. Especially, the northern two prefectures, Akita and Niigata are well known for their production of high-grade rice such as Akitakomachi and Koshihikari brands. The monkey, here, is a symbol of laziness and wickedness. The pheasant is a symbol of honest and hardworking farmers. The monkey is successful in obtaining what he wants by exploiting the pheasant. However, the monkey is eventually punished for his wicked acts by other animals. The tale suggests the importance of hard work and honesty. And when hard work and honesty are violated, there are sanctions. Rice fields were the symbol of hard work and honesty.

*Folk Tale 2. Hachikoku Yama (Hachikoku Mountain)*

There once was a rich older brother who was stingy and a poor younger brother who was very good. One year the younger brother wanted to borrow rice seed from his brother, but the older brother put the seed into hot water before he gave it. The younger brother planted it, but none sprouted. Instead, a single calabash appeared. It spread out over his whole field and many gourds formed on it. He decided to eat gourds instead of rice. He picked the first one that ripened and tried to cut it open with a knife, but he couldn't. He split it open with an ax. A huge mound of rice poured out as high as a mountain. He became a famous *choja* (*Choja* means one upon whom unexpected good fortune is bestowed-a man, a woman, a couple, or a family.) (Yanagita 1986: 66).

This folk tale is transmitted in nine prefectures in Japan. Most of the prefectures are predominantly agricultural. Here, the younger brother became a wealthy man through an abundant harvest of rice which was prized by common people. During the pre-modern era in Japan, rice production was the most important economic activity. The amount of rice produced in an area was equal to the amount of power the feudal lord had (e.g., Tokugawa Shogunate's system of *roku*). Therefore, rice was a significant source of wealth. The contrast between a good person and a bad person determines the eventual difference in wealth mediated by rice production. In producing rice, people need to possess the quality of honesty and hard-work which eventually bring wealth.

*Folk Tale 3. Mudsnaill Choja*

While an old couple were pulling weeds in their rice paddy, they heard a voice asking them to make him their son. It came from a mudsnail. The next day he had them saddle their horse. He mounted it and rode to a great house. He annoyed everyone by climbing onto the wooden ledge around the hearth and splashing boiling water and

scattering ashes. He finally got the daughter of the family as his bride and took her home on the horse with him. The old couple was delighted, but the girl hated the mudsnail so much. She couldn't stand it. He told her that if she hated him that much, she should take him to the stone courtyard where straw was crushed and crush him. When she did as he said, he turned into a handsome youth. They lived together very happy after that (Yanagita 1986: 15).

This story is found in eight prefectures. Again, this story is disseminated in many agricultural areas. The old couple is hard working people and they do not have any children who take care of them. A mudsnail in the paddy field became their son and he brings a bride. As a result, the old couple became happy thereafter. Again, this story suggests that honesty and hard work in rice fields will bring happiness in life.

Common people in Japan socially constructed paddy fields as moral. Honesty and hard work in rice production bring good harvest of rice. It leads to wealth and happiness. In contrast, dishonesty and laziness in rice production receive negative sanctions. The influence of Tokugawa Shogunate on the social construction of paddy fields as moral cannot be overlooked. Tokugawa's main concern was order in society. Especially, to control farmers who consisted the majority of the population and who were the source of Tokugawa's finance was critical. For Tokugawa, the creation and internalization of morality associated with paddy fields among people became an effective means of social control in agricultural regions of Japan in which Tokugawa's source of power resided.

## **Paddy Fields as an Asset and Production**

Before the modern era, rice fields were viewed as sacred and moral. This conception of reality was transformed into a different reality mainly due to the

change in farmers' location in society which was caused by institutional forces. Before the Second World War, farmers were in the bottom of the Japanese economic hierarchy. Farmers' mentality was dominated by the ideas of diligent and thrift (Fukutake 1967). Farmers worked hard on land because wealth came from the harvest of rice. However, as farmers became independent farmers through the land reform initiated by GHQ, their status improved. The improvement of their economic status was supplemented by the growth of Japanese economy which provided them with work at nearby factories. This resulted in the emergence of large number of part-time farmers. The process was accelerated by the mechanization of rice farming. It allowed women and the elderly to engage in rice production. Men were able to work off farm.

In and nearby metropolitan areas, farmers increasingly interacted with city dwellers and learned the consumption pattern of urbanites. Further integration of farmers into the commercial economy made farmers' old mentality; that is, consumption as evil; obsolete. They were more inclined to accept monetary calculations. The desire for more consumption of goods increased farmers' off farm work. The declining of old mentality of hard work on rice fields was heightened by the rapid increase of land price in urban areas. This process was accelerated by farmers' awareness of their wealth by their land holding. Rice fields began to be symbolized as real estate wealth. Therefore, Japanese farmers in metropolitan areas were not conceived as hardworking and frugal farmers anymore, depicted in folk tales. Ohnuki-Tierney shows a comment by an influential business strategist whose comment represents a feeling of urbanites. He says that "in 1986 of one hundred billionaires in Japan, sixty to seventy were farmers who had sold their farmlands. The farmers were waiting for land prices to go up so they could sell their land and go off on world tours" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993: 24). The land price in metropolitan areas became very expensive<sup>2)</sup> and

farmers close to major cities became very rich instantly.

As the land price became so high, paddy fields became a marketable asset. Paddy fields and other farmlands in and nearby urban areas were not viewed as land for production anymore. Income derived from production of crops became very small indeed. Farmers could get a large amount of income by manipulating land as an asset. Farmers did not need to work hard and to be honest as folk tales taught. By working hard on paddy fields, they could get a small amount of money, but by manipulating the land, they could get a large amount of income. If farmers had followed the maxim of folk tales, they would not have become rich. They had to change their view on paddy fields to become rich. The best way to become rich was to perceive paddy fields as an asset. Thus, the farmers' primary concern was to manage the land rather than to produce rice. A survey conducted in 1987 shows that, in farmland of Urbanization Promotion Areas<sup>3)</sup>, 60 percent of the farmers received income of only \$3,704 a year from farm production. Anchordoguy concludes that "most 'farmers' were faking farming" (Anchordoguy 1992: 104).

In the 1980s, the myth that the land price would not fall and that it would continuously increase was held by the most Japanese. Thus, keeping paddy fields as an asset was considered to be the best way for urban farmers to increase wealth. The rationale for keeping paddy fields was articulated by Hanayama. He says that "(Farmers) thought that as long as they possessed land, its worth would annually increase at a rate as high as 20 percent while the gain that they could expect from financial assets such as corporate debentures-which they might purchase with an income from land sales-would be at best only around 10 per annum" (Hanayama, 1986: 9).

Farmers in urban areas saw rice fields as an asset. They concerned how to accrue income through holding on to their paddy fields. Keeping rice fields as

the most precious asset was the core of motivation for the farmers' behaviors. Hanayama's study on farmer households in Urbanization Promotion Areas illustrates farmers' behaviors on farmland. His study is a detailed interview-based survey of 400 landowning farm households in the Tokyo metropolitan area. It was conducted in eight areas from four cities in the area in 1978. The finding shows that the farmers in the study were generally rich. In three areas in the study, the farmers' annual incomes were equivalent to the richest fifth of urban worker households. However, as I mentioned above, the majority of the income did not come from the sale of agriculture production. The income from agriculture was simply not enough for sustaining their households. They had to obtain income from other sources. One source was from secondary occupation. Of 400 participants in the survey, 217 households had secondary occupation. The most popular secondary occupation was a renter of houses or rooms. They built apartments or houses on their land and rented them to city dwellers. 87 households in the survey were in this category. The second most popular secondary occupation was a white collar worker. 58 households in the survey were in this category. The third most popular secondary occupation was a small shop owner. 43 households in the survey were in this category. The farmers also gained income through investing in stock, bond and savings. Money for the investment came from sales of their land. When asked for reasons of land disposal, 256 cases which were the most frequent were in the reason of investment in stock, bond and savings. This is 27.3 percent of the total case (The total cases = 938). The second frequently mentioned reason for land disposal was building owned houses (16.7 %), followed by building houses or apartments for rent (14.3 %).

Although investment in stock, bond and savings was the most frequently answered reason to sell their land, this did not mean they were eager to sell their

land. They sold land only when the sale was necessary. As a valuable asset, land was kept as long as farmers could manage. The money from land sale was spent for the necessity first, then, the extra money was invested in stock, bond and savings. Hanayama concludes that “the motives for farmers for selling land can largely be categorized as the need for rebuilding their own houses, for building rental houses and apartment houses, and for paying the inheritance tax, with the needs for alternative land purchases and for investments in saving, deposits, and stocks as supplementary motives (Hanayama 1986: 73).” Farmers in urban areas saw paddy fields as a valuable asset. Their rational calculation increased their income through secondary occupation, and optimally retained their paddy fields as a key asset.

In contrast to farmers in and nearby metropolitan areas, farmers in rural areas were not able to work off farm with good salary. To supplement income, they often had to become migrant workers who worked in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya. Also, many people especially young people migrated into urban cities, which resulted in depopulation in rural areas. Rural areas did not have a demand for land like urban areas. Therefore, farmers in rural areas did not experience the land price hike like farmers in and around urban areas did. Farmers in rural areas saw paddy fields as a site for production which brought family income. The farmers improved their productivity of rice by adopting new varieties of rice and new farming technology. The government’s heavy subsidy on rice helped farmers’ maintenance of the meaning of rice as production.

### **Paddy Fields as Beauty**

How to see paddy fields is not fixed. It differs by the definitions of people who are located in a different place, time and group. In the pre modern era,

Japanese people saw paddy fields as sacred and moral. In the modern era, farmers in urban areas saw paddy fields as an asset. Farmers in rural areas saw paddy fields as a site for production. Recently, the social construction of paddy fields as production in rural areas is gradually transforming as farmers face change in the agricultural policy.

The Food Control Act was enacted in 1942. The act was designed to buy and sell all rice in Japan. Right after World War II, it controlled price, storage and distribution of rice. During the war and the subsequent years, it was beneficial for the nation which suffered food shortage. However, people started to eat rice less and less as their income increased which brought westernization of diet. At the same time, the productivity of rice increased. In the early 1960s, the rice output eventually surpassed the demand. In 1979, the government sold rice to retailers at a 12.3 % loss (Moore 1990: 288). Since the government controlled the rice market totally, the market mechanism of supply and demand did not work. Although the problem became apparent, the relationship between farmers and the Liberal Democratic Party was a strong block to abolish the act. The farmers got a heavy subsidy and the politicians were insured the farmers' vote. The government responded to the problem of surplus piece by piece. One of the efforts was called Rice Production Control and Diversion Program between 1971 and 1975. This program assigned each prefecture a quota of rice crop reduction. The reduction was done either by fallowing or by diversion of crops. When fallowed, the farmer received 230 dollars per 0.1 hectares for 3 years. When diverted to perennial crops, the farmer received 370 dollars per 0.1 hectares for 5 years. Through these programs, rice acreage declined. For examples, in 1970, Japan's rice acreage was 2,923,000 hectares. It became 2,377,000 hectares in 1980. And, in 1990, it further declined to 2,110,000 hectares (Burmeister 1994: 56). Yet, these programs were not the fundamental solution. They simply



postponed the structural problem of Japanese agriculture to be visible to all citizens until the United States pressed for opening Japanese rice market at the GATT Uruguay Round of multilateral negotiations. Eventually, on December 14, 1993, Japanese government decided to open the rice market on limited basis under the GATT plan. According to the agreement, Japan would import 4 % to 8 % of rice from 1994 to 2000. After that, the tariffication of rice import would be implemented. The ban on rice import was at last discarded (Saito 1995).

The international pressure on Japanese agriculture made the Japanese government to formulate the Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas in July 1999 which replaced the Agricultural Basic Law established in 1961. The main purposes of this new law were the realization of stable food supply and acknowledgement of multiple functions of Japanese agriculture (Tashiro 2003: 121). One strategy to survive in the international market, which the government and farmers sought, was to increase their size of operation (the economy of scale). To be competitive means its survival and thus it maintains the stable food supply. However, even though farmers increase their operational size, it is difficult to compete with other rice producing countries such as the U.S. and Thailand. Burmeister gives two reasons that this strategy would not work. First, the farmland is too expensive to get economic return from agriculture production. Second, the landowners are reluctant to sell or lease the farmland (Burmeister 1994: 56).

Another strategy which the government and the farmers sought was to view the farmland as possessing multiple functions. In addition to the production of rice, the government found other values in paddy fields. Japanese rice fields disappear if they are viewed only from economic terms, thus, the government rationalized the existence of paddy fields by specifying six functions of environmental externalities (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries,

The Government of Japan). The first function is preventing floods. Paddy fields temporarily keep water when faced with heavy rain. The estimated value of this function is 15.0 billion dollars. The second function is fostering water resources. Paddy fields keep the water for a while and absorb it into the ground. This process stabilizes river flows and ground water is used for drinking. The estimated value of this function is 5.7 billion dollars. The third function is to prevent soil erosion and landslide. Paddy fields mitigate damages caused by soil erosion and landslide. The estimated value of this function is 363 million dollars. The fourth function is purifying soil. Paddy fields work as a waste treatment. The estimated value of this function is 35 million dollars. The fifth function is preserving rural landscape and recreational amenities. Paddy fields attract urban residents who appreciate the beauty and they feel relaxed. The estimated value of this function is 13.2 billion dollars. The final function is purifying air. Paddy fields absorb carbon dioxide. The estimated value of this function is 1.3 billion dollars.

As indicated above, the value of the fifth function, that is, rural landscape and recreational amenities, is very high. Preservation of rural landscape means to appreciate the beauty of paddy fields which become recreational amenities. It is a view that is constructed from above (government) and from below (farmers and rural residents). Rural residents including farmers and the government have been good partners to develop this conception of paddy fields. This construction has been viewed as a potential for the survival of the farmers and rural residents.

Attracting city dwellers for traveling to see beauties of rural landscape is the main focus of sustaining rural areas by the government and rural residents. The government's rural policy statement, "National Action Plan for Agenda 21", states that "Japan will engage itself in promoting the culture and history of rural regions, the practical application of resources and technologies which are

peculiar to individual rural regions, the acceleration of exchange between rural and urban areas, and creating scenic rural spaces” (The Council of Ministries for Global Environmental Conservation, The Government of Japan, December 1993).

Promotion of travels to rural areas has been carried out by the government, travel agencies and rural residents in the name of green tourism. It is defined as “city residents visiting tranquil agricultural areas, enjoying the greenery, landscapes, natural environment, and traditional cultures of these areas, building friendships with local people in the process. It also allows urban residents to experience farm life” (Japan Agriculture Group 1997). Green tourism includes such types of tourism as agro-tourism and eco-tourism (Furukawa and Matsuda 2003: 11). Recent promotion of green tourism is in response to the international pressure for the liberalization of agriculture in the 1990s. However, its promotion had already been carried out by the government since 1970. On that year, government’s advisory committee which discusses issues of promoting mountain villages submitted a report on promotion and development of mountain villages. It said that “mountain village regions should play a large nationwide role by protecting and preserving the exquisite nature over a long period of time and by contributing to healthy development of the economy and society.....The regions provide the majority of people (mainly city residents) with the place of recreation and relaxation.” This is considered as the moment of birth of green tourism in Japan (Furukawa and Matsuda 2003: 12). Thus, green tourism initiated by the government in 1970 is further promoted recently as the international pressure intensifies.

In order to attract urban residents for traveling to rural areas, travel agents’ offices in urban cities often use posters which show beautiful paddy fields. The posters portray the uniqueness of Japanese culture, history and landscape. It has been bolstered by Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry (MAFF)’s

recognition of 100 best terrace paddy fields in Japan since 1999. Narrow and steep terrace paddy fields are not suited for efficient rice production, yet, they provoke a nostalgic feeling as they overlap with the image of “*furusato*.” (Yamamura 2003). According to a survey, about 60 percent of participants in green tourism enjoy rural landscape represented by paddy fields (Nōrin Tōkei Kyōkai 2004: 233).

Tourism generates income for rural residents. Farmers and/or other rural residents establish lodging so-called *minshuku* (Kim, 1986: 189). The original image of *minshuku* is that farmers share their empty rooms for urban travelers. The farmers cook special rural dishes using food materials from their farm. During dinner, the farmers tell folk tales and other stories related to the region. As green tourism was promoted nationwide especially since the 1990s, programs on how to manage *minshuku* have been carried out. Japanese Agriculture Group (JA), an agricultural cooperative, in conjunction with MAFF, hold a training course for rural residents who manage *minshuku*. The course is designed to acquire knowledge about local agriculture and their communities. It also teaches skills in hosting guests and creating friendly atmosphere (Japan Agriculture Group 1997). The number of *minshuku* operated by farmers is about 5,000 and 9–10 million people used those *minshuku* in 2000 (Nōrin Tōkei Kyōkai 2004: 232). Paddy fields as beauty are inroad to the Japanese rural policy and in minds of travelers and rural residents. It is a social construction from above and below necessitated by the pressure from the international market economy.

## Conclusion

Japanese paddy fields have changed their meanings over the years. In the pre modern era, rice fields meant for the root of sacredness and morality. Noble people saw paddy fields as sacred. Common people saw them as moral. However, when Japan experienced modernization and when it was gradually integrated into the international market economy, the negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning of paddy fields occurred. As a consequence, the diversified meanings emerged. In urban areas, paddy fields meant as an asset. In rural regions, initially, it was a place for production. However, in recent years, as the market economy threatens rice production, farmers and rural residents began to see paddy fields as beauty. This new conception of rice fields promote green tourism.

The meaning of landscape is not fixed, that is, the physical environment does not have an inherent meaning. The meaning of landscape is negotiated and renegotiated by actors. Japanese people have changed the meaning of paddy fields as they faced a threat and/or an opportunity. That is, the structural change in Japanese society required the actors to change its symbolic meaning. In this process, the state (the ruler) took a pivotal role in defining the social construction of paddy fields. The state (the ruler)'s motivation to define or redefine it was influenced by the internal dynamics before World War II (e.g., the Yamato period – paddy fields as sacred in relation to the formation of the imperial system; the Edo period – paddy field as moral in relation to the social control of farmers). After WW II, the international (external) dynamics (e.g., GHQ – the land reform; WTO – the liberalization of agriculture) influenced the state to actively engage in the social construction of paddy fields in the form of

agriculture policies. As these examples show, under the strong influence of the state (the ruler), Japanese people constructed and re-constructed the meaning of paddy fields.

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## Notes

- 1) There may be various symbolic meanings of rice and paddy fields differentiated by time, location and groups other than the three proposed meanings. In this paper, I wanted to highlight the salient meanings appeared in Japan. This does not mean to negate the existence of other meanings of rice and paddy fields.
- 2) For example, in 1987, an average government benchmark price of commercial area in the central three wards of Tokyo was 200,000 dollars per square meter (Noguchi 1992: 13). This indicates that an average salaried man/woman cannot own a house in the center of Tokyo.
- 3) An Urbanization Promotion Area is defined as “the zone where towns have already been formed and the zone where urbanization will be sought on the preferential and planned basis within around 10 years.” (Hanayama 1986: 34)

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