

Suehara, Tatsuro, Mr, Acad, Anthropology, Japan, "Yui and its New Role in Post-Industrial Japanese Society" – P2- K

Tatsuro Suehara (Graduate School of Agriculture, Kyoto University, Japan)

1. What is "Yui" ?

"Yui" is the Japanese word for a traditional system of mutual labor exchange among farm families. This word is primarily used for farm work, but is also used for a wide variety of non-farm work, including roof thatching and various kinds of daily work.

The word "yui" has been used in the Japanese language since ancient times. In his article titled "Study on Rural Society"¹, Kizaemon Ariga points out that the word is already found in the *Man'yōshū*, the earliest anthology of Japanese verse compiled in the 8th century.

The word is pronounced "yui" most commonly, but is also pronounced in different ways from region to region: "ee", "ii", "yuidemae", "yuimaaru", etc.².

The Chinese character for "yui" is "結", which is pronounced "yui" in the standard native Japanese reading and "ketsu" in the Chinese-derived reading. The character is made up of two parts, the left-hand radical "糸" and the right-hand radical "吉". The left part ("糸") means "thread" or "string", and the right part ("吉") means "good fortune". The latter also means an action of putting the cap onto a pot or bag that is filled up with some things.

The character "結" as a whole means an action of tying things with string or uniting persons into one body.³

In addition, the character "結", if combined with other Chinese characters, will acquire new meanings: for example, "結婚" means "marriage", and "團結" means "solidarity".

Formerly, *yui* as a form of labor exchange was widely organized by Japanese farm households in the busiest season of year, such as the time of rice transplantation or rice harvesting.

In Japan, rice transplanting was rarely done on a household basis, but was normally done with the cooperation of several households of the same *yui* party. In most areas of Japan, it was women that played a major role in rice transplantation as transplanters, while men's role in it was just to hand rice seedlings to women. Even today, we can see such a clear division of labor by sex in ritualized performances played at "rice-planting festivals" held in many places of the country.

Here let us suppose a *yui* party of five households (A, B, C, D, E). In this case, exchanges of labor for rice transplantation are done in the following way. On the first day, all the member households work together on A's field. On the second day, all work on B's field. Then, all work on C's on the third day, on D's on the fourth day and on E's on the fifth day. In this way, paddy fields of all the member households will have been transplanted when one cycle of labor exchange ends.

The *yui* system is based on principles as follows: (1) No money is involved in any exchange of labor; (2) Every receiver of labor must return to the giver the same amount of labor; (3) Exchanges of labor are

¹ This article was re-titled "Japanese Family System and Tenant System" in 1948. See *Collection of Kizaemon Ariga's Writings Vol.2*, p.634 (Tokyo: Miraisha, 1966)

² *ibid*, pp635-636

³ Akiyasu Todo, Akira Matsumoto, Akira Takeda eds., *Kanjigen*, pp.935-936 (Tokyo: GakushuKenkyusha, 1988)

done on a household to household basis, not on a person to person basis (this is, I found, a very unique feature of *yui*, compared with labor exchange systems in other countries).

As a feature of the study of *yui* in Japan, it can be mentioned that Japanese scholars, including Ariga Kizaemon, have been focusing their interests narrowly on *yui* practices in rural communities.

2. Disappearing *Yui*

It was not very long ago that *yui* began disappearing from Japan. In the 1970s, it was still widely practiced in many rural areas of the country⁴.

In the 1955 Agricultural Census, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries established “*temagae /yui*” (both mean “exchange of labor”) as a new sub-category under the category of “hired labor”. As a result, “hired labor” came to be divided into four sub-categories: (1) “yearly hired labor”; (2) “seasonally hired labor”; (3) “*temagae/yui*”; (4) “*tetsudai*” (lit. “help” or “labor service as a pure gift”)⁵. In 1955, the number of the farm households that used any form of “hired labor” was 3,052,530, occupying almost 50% of the total number of farm households in Japan (6,056,630). Of 3,052,530, 1,503,070 households received some labor through “*temagae/yui*”, and 1,101,005 households received some labor through “*tetsudai*”. The former and the latter respectively represented 24.8% (almost one-fourth) and 18.2% – thus 40% in total – of the total number of farm households.

And, a total of 15,793,205 persons were engaged in “*temagae/yui*” in the same year, meaning that, on average, each one of this type of households received 10.5 persons’ labor force through “*temagae/yui*”. Next, let us look at the situation in 1975.

By 1975, the total number of farm households had dropped to 4,953,071. Of this total number, 1,010,299 households (approximately 20%) utilized the “*temagae/yui*” type of labor, in which a total of 11,410,818 persons were engaged. This means that, on average, each one of these households received 11.3 persons’ labor force through “*temagae/yui*”.

The number of the households that received some labor through “*tetsudai*” had also decreased to 557,507, representing only 11.3% of the total number of farm households. In the year, therefore, 31.3% of all farm households received some labor support through non-monetary methods — 20% through “*temagae/yui*” and 11.3% through “*tetsudai*”.

In addition, both the number of the households employing “yearly hired labor” and that of the households employing “seasonally hired labor” had also fallen during the period between 1955 and 1975. The former had dropped from 138,305 in 1955 to 6,335 in 1975, while the latter had dropped from 2,197,880 in 1955 to 1,343,233 in 1975. In both cases, the rate of decrease was higher than that in the case of the “*temagae/yui*” type of households.

Then, let us examine the situation in 1990.

By 1990, the total number of farm households had further declined to 2,970,527. Of this number, 12,3675 households (4.2%) received some labor through “*temagae/yui*”, in which 1,854,900 persons were engaged. Thus, it is calculated that, on average, each one of these households received 15 persons’ labor force through “*temagae/yui*”. On the other hand, the number of the households that used “*tetsudai*” was 304,926, occupying 10.3% of all farm households. Accordingly, in 1990, only 14.5% of farm households received some labor support through non-monetary ways — 4.2% through “*temagae/yui*” and 10.3% through “*tetsudai*”.

⁴ All the statistical figures in this section are cited from The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, *Agricultural Census: From Meiji 37 to Heisei 12* (Tokyo: Nourin Tokeikyukai, 2003)

⁵ In the Agricultural Census, “*temagae/yui*” is defined as “labor that one household receives from another household through a mutual exchange of labor, as well as through communal labor”, while “*tetsudai*” is defined as “labor that one receives from another without any payment or compensation” (*ibid*, 482).

From above facts, it is quite apparent that the role of *yui* in rural Japan had drastically changed during the fifteen years from 1975 to 1990. In 1975, still 20% of farm households used the *yui* system of labor exchange, but in 1990 the percentage dropped to as low as 4.2%. What was the reason for this? It is generally said that in any rural society, the use of non-monetary forms of labor exchange inevitably shifts toward the use of hired labor.

So, in order to see if this is also the case with *yui* in Japan, let us examine the Census data on both "yearly hired labor" and "seasonally hired labor" in 1975 and 1990, since these two types of labor are accompanied with the use of money. On one hand, the number of the households employing "yearly hired labor" increased from 6,335 in 1975 to 8,218 in 1990. But, compared with the total number of farm households, these numbers were very small, almost negligible, and the increase between the two years was also very small (less than 2,000 households).

On the other hand, the number of the households employing "seasonally hired labor" drastically dropped from 1,343,233 in 1975 to 370,446 in 1990. The decrease between the two years was very large (almost one million households). In addition, the number of seasonally hired laborers also decreased nearly to half, from 34,461,668 in 1975 to 1,588,780 in 1990. These facts clearly indicate that, at least in rural Japan, the shift from non-monetary labor exchange to hired labor did not occur. Then, why did the decline of *yui* occur in Japan?

Before tackling this question, let us have a look at more recent statistics concerning *yui* practices. The 2000 Agricultural Census established a new sub-category named "*temagae/yui/tetsudai*" under the category of "hired labor", by combining two formerly separated sub-categories, "*temagae/yui*" and "*tetsudai*". According to the Census, the number of the farming households that received labor through "*temagae/yui/tetsudai*" was 297,710, occupying 12.7% of all farm households, and a total of 6,683,676 persons were engaged in this type of labor. It is therefore calculated that, on average, each one of this type of households received 22.5 persons' workforce through "*temagae/yui/tetsudai*".

3. The Decline of *Yui* and the Mechanization of Japanese Agriculture

As already seen above, the sharp decline of *yui* in rural Japan demands some other explanation than the stereotyped one emphasizing a shift from farmers' dependence on non-monetary systems of labor exchange toward their dependence on monetary transactions of labor. There must be some other reasons for the phenomenon. In my view, the biggest reason must be sought in a drastic shift from human-powered agriculture to mechanized agriculture, which occurred in Japan in the 1970s and continued until the early 1990s. One may wonder why such a highly industrialized country like Japan had not achieved significant mechanization of its agriculture by the 1970s.

Of course, there are several reasons for this: some are related to farm practices specific to paddy farming in Japan, and others are related to a unique employment pattern of Japanese farm households.

First, let us look at farm practices of Japanese rice farmers. Japanese agriculture is primarily based on rice farming in paddy fields. Rice is not directly sown in paddy fields, but is first sown in seedbeds, then later transplanted in paddies. Rice farming is made up of a series of farm work as follows: plowing, soil preparation, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, drying, threshing, gathering and bundling rice straws.

Among these, the work of plowing and soil preparation began to be mechanized at a relatively early stage, with the introduction of tractors. However, even this mechanization of plowing work did not start very easily: it started not with the easy introduction of large, heavy-duty tractors, but with the invention of small-sized, walking-type tillers. The reason was that the introduction of large-size tractors was considered to be very inefficient for small-scale Japanese agriculture with an average farm size of one hectare. Then, hand-weeding began to be replaced by spraying of chemical herbicides, with the invention and spread of small, shouldering-type sprayers. Subsequently, small-scale threshing machines and then small-scale harvesters were invented and began spreading throughout the country. In short, the mechanization of agriculture in Japan was not achieved all at once in a systematic way, but gradually progressed.

Rice transplanting by hand was the most difficult work to mechanize, and it was in fact mechanized at the last stage. Indeed, it was very difficult to mechanize farmers' specialist skills in rice transplantation, such

as transplanting rice seedlings (two or three in one action) in a paddy field, with suitable strength and at a suitable depth. It was in the 1970s that such farmers' skills began to be mechanized, and rice-transplanting machines began spreading across the country. Meanwhile, the mechanization of rice-harvesting work also made further progress in the 1980s, leading to the invention of combine harvesters with the multifunctions of reaping, threshing, drying, gathering and bundling straws. As seen above, even in Japan, which is now renowned as a kingdom of robots, it was not long before but in the 1970s and 1980s that a complete system of paddy mechanization was formulated. In this point, Japan makes a sharp contrast with European countries, where their dry-field farming had been systematically mechanized in much earlier days.

Another reason for the delayed farm mechanization in Japan can be sought in small-scale agriculture practiced by Japanese farm households. Since 1955, by when the post-war land reform had already achieved a great success in dissolving the old landlord-tenant system, the great majority of Japan's farming population has been occupied by small-scale farmers with an average farm size of less than one hectare. Under the circumstances, the invention of small-sized and cheap agricultural machines was absolutely necessary for the mechanization of Japanese agriculture. Japanese farmers, on the other hand, preferred to have their own farm machines, rather than to jointly own them with other farmers, because they wanted to use farm machines at any time they liked. This preference among Japanese farmers for personal ownership of farm machines must be deeply related to the ecological background of Japanese agriculture, in which a one-day delay in transplanting or harvesting can lead to a great decrease of rice yield.

One more reason for the delayed farm mechanization in Japan can be sought in the employment situation surrounding Japanese farm households. In 1961, Japan enacted the Agricultural Basic Law, with the aim of enlarging the size of farms, promoting the selective expansion of agricultural production, raising the income level of farmers, and boosting the international competitiveness of its agriculture.

The establishment of the Law nearly coincided with that of the same kind of law in Germany (1955) and in France (1960). In Japan, however, unlike in these two countries, agriculture was deeply conditioned by the situation of other industries. In the first place, the Japanese government enacted the Law with the intention of liberalizing the export of manufactured goods and thereby switching its economy toward economic liberalism. In fact, immediately after the enactment of the Law, the government started liberalizing both the export of manufactured goods and the import of agricultural products. This was the turning point of Japan for an industrial country. In this period, the country's industries needed plenty of labor force. Numberless public works projects were carried out, and the modernization of cities, roads, and railways were realized. In this process, Japanese industries needed plenty of rural labor force. Especially in such industries as construction, building, and machine manufacturing, the most part of labor force was made up of people who came from farm villages. Among these ex-farmers, there existed two types: one was the type of migrant laborers who came and worked in urban areas on a seasonal basis, and the other was the type of permanent laborers who had settled down in urban areas. Fresh high-school graduates, in most cases, became the latter type, and continued to support the industrialization of the country. On the other hand, the former type, that is, those who became seasonal workers continued to farm when they stayed in home villages. This type of people made an important contribution to the mechanization of Japanese agriculture, as well as to the urbanization or modernization of rural life in general, by bringing the money they earned in urban areas into home villages.

Once a complete system of farm mechanization had been built up in Japan, most farm households in the country stopped *yui* practices. In most farm households, the majority of family members became employed by other industries. The invention of rice-transplanting machines, in particular, enabled Japanese farmers to work on paddy fields only in weekends while working in nearby factories or offices in weekdays. Consequently, the average annual income of farm households greatly increased to such an extent as exceeding that of ordinary office workers. At the same time, however, farmers' debts by buying agricultural machinery also came to a sizable amount.

In 1999, the New Agricultural Basic Law (correctly "Basic Law on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas") was enacted, in place of the 1961 Law. By the year, as the 1961 Law had expected, the average annual income of farm households already exceeded that of ordinary wage laborers, and a situation was also created in which many kinds of crops were imported in large quantities every year. However, on the other

hand, Japan failed to generate internationally competitive farmers except for a very few, and the average farm size in the country remained small at a little over one hectare.

As a result, Japanese agriculture is now maintained mainly by old farmers aged sixty years or more. Therefore, I am afraid that it will inevitably reach a critical stage ten years from now, when these old farmers retire from farming,

In addition, I have a deep concern about the very existence of Japanese farming communities as well. Today, there are a lot of farm villages in which the elderly ratio (the percentage of the population aged sixty or older) is over 50%. How can these villages survive as sound local communities? This is a big problem. Yet despite this, the Japanese economy as a whole is right on the way to the so-called globalization. This trend toward economic globalization makes it more difficult for Japanese farm communities to survive. How to maintain rural communities and how to secure stable food production are both the biggest problems in present-day Japan.

4. The Emergence of New *Yui*

In the 1990s and the 2000s, various forms of “new *yui*” have emerged all over Japan. By the word “new *yui*”, I mean any kind of group for non-farm work organized on the principle of mutual exchange of voluntary labor (including one-way provisioning of labor as a pure gift).

In Japan, until very recently, the concept of “volunteer” has not taken firm hold in the society. Of course, the word “volunteer” has long existed in the society since it was imported from the English language. In my view, however, it was only after having been stricken by the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, that the Japanese came to understand the correct meaning of the word, and began organizing various kinds of “volunteer” groups. Very interestingly, these days there are emerging not a small number of “volunteer” groups whose names include the word “*yui*”. This fact suggests that such “volunteer” groups regard “*yui*” as a word to symbolize the spirit of volunteerism.

As argued above, the traditional *yui* as labor exchange for farm work is based on farmers’ need for mutual assistance in the busy farming season. There, any participant is not dealt with as a mere laborer. On the contrary, he/she is treated as a respectable person, by being involved in interpersonal relations based on the principle of mutual dependence or mutual respect — such a relationship is called “*otagaisama*” in the Japanese language. Two persons connected by this relationship are equal with each other: on one occasion, one may assist the other, but on another occasion, the other may assist one. Their positions can be easily switched to each other.

Then, this “*otagaisama*” relationship rapidly spread among the Japanese when the Great Earthquake struck the country in 1995. Immediately after the Earthquake, a great number of people were sent to the stricken area to help the victims of the disaster, through local governments and various private organizations of all over the country. Those who were dispatched to the area did not regard the Earthquake as being nothing to do with them. They probably thought that since the same could happen to themselves the next day, there was no difference between helping others and helping themselves. I think that such a way of thinking is quite understandable for Japanese people who have a long tradition of *yui*. In practice, in 2004 when another big earthquake attacked Niigata Prefecture, many volunteers rushed to the stricken area from Kobe, a big city that had been most seriously destroyed by the 1995 Great Earthquake. Asked why they came to Niigata to help the victims of the earthquake, most of the volunteers from Kobe answered that they were motivated to do so by the experience of having been helped at the time of the 1995 Earthquake. This mutual assistance in disaster relief may be regarded as a form of new *yui*.

Besides volunteer groups for disaster relief, there are various kinds of groups whose activities are not related to agriculture but whose names include the word “*yui*”. I would like to call all these “new *yui* groups”. New *yui* groups can be seen in different places of the Japanese society (rural or urban) where some new form of mutual help is strongly required.

The following are among new *yui* groups: a group for supporting the handicapped in finding employment (Okinawa Pref.); an NPO for mutual help (Aichi Pref.); a center for promoting civic activities (Kiryuu City in Gunma Pref. this is a public institution); a public corporation for nursing-care services (Yokohama

City in Kanagawa Pref.); a group of members of a consumers' cooperative society for mutual help (Kanagawa Pref.); an NPO for life-long education (Okinawa Pref.); a group of teachers of social studies (Shizuoka Pref.); a group for promoting the use of community currency (Fukuoka Pref.); a private farm for organic agriculture (Nagano Pref.).

The above-mentioned groups are diverse in type of organization, ranging from a private individual, through a cooperative society, a NPO to a public body, but every one of them has a name including the word "yui".

All the new *yui* groups mentioned above have nothing to do with agriculture (except for one case of an organic farm in Nagano), but they share the spirit of egalitarianism and mutual assistance with the traditional *yui* that was once widely practiced in rural Japan. In Japan, which has already reached the stage of post-industrial society, there are not a small number of people who do not think that the system of market economy can solve every kind of problem. Then, such Japanese people are now trying to create some alternative system free from the control of market mechanism, within the existing system of market economy. The emergence of new *yui* groups is, I think, an expression of such efforts.

References

- Ariga, Kizaemon, "Study on Rural Society" 1938, ("Japanese Family System and Land Tenant System", 1943), p.1-715, Miraisha, Tokyo, 1967 (in Japanese)
- Ariga, Kizaemon, "Extended Family System and *Nago* System", p.1-526, Mirai-sha, Tokyo, 1967 (in Japanese)
- Ariga, Kizaemon, "Social Organizations in Japanese Village", p.1-380, Mirai-sha, Tokyo, 1968 (in Japanese)
- Suehara, Tatsuro, "Labor Exchange System among the Tembo", *African Study Monographs*, vol.3, p.59-69, Kyoto University, Kyoto, 1983
- Suehara, Tatsuro, *Food Production in Equatorial Africa*, p.1-334, Dohosha, Kyoto, 1990 (in Japanese)
- Suehara, Tatsuro, *Agriculture and Human Beings*, p.1-279, Sekaishisoshu, Kyoto, 2004 (in Japanese)
- Suehara, Tatsuro, "*Yui* and *Likilimba*; A Comparative Study of Labor Exchange Systems in Japan and the D.R.Congo", paper presented to International Conference on Moral Economy in Africa held in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, 18-20 August 2005.
- Todo, Akiyasu, Akira Matsumoto, Akira Takeda eds., *Kanjigen*, p.1-1640, Gakushu Kenkyusha, Tokyo, 1994 (in Japanese)
- The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, *Agricultural Census; From Meiji 37 to Heisei 12*, p.1-741, Nourin Tokei Kyokai, Tokyo, 2003 (in Japanese)