

Creating a New Relationship with the Environment Through Food: Learning from Community Development Initiatives in Kaneyama Township in Yamagata Prefecture, Northeast Japan



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Abstract Kaneyama Township in Yamagata Prefecture, Northeast Japan, neither grew buckwheat nor had a culture of buckwheat in its past. It is not the case that the natural environment of this township was ever basically unsuitable for growing buckwheat; rather, the crop was not grown because no economic or practical rationale had ever been found to do so. However, the buckwheat in this area has now been found to have unique value through exchange between local residents and urban residents. This chapter will look at how buckwheat has been positioned as a local food in these community development initiatives. We will consider the possibilities for creating a new relationship with the environment through food. We may be able to visualize how what is taken to be a “relationship with the environment” is not some latent or inherent presence, but rather a product of human activity and intervention over time.

Keywords Buckwheat · Environment · Local food · Kaneyama Township · Yamagata Prefecture

1 Foreword

The township of Kaneyama, situated at the northern end of Yamagata Prefecture, has a population of about 6500 (Fig. 1). The township is home to a restaurant that serves handmade buckwheat noodles; it is open on Saturdays and Sundays only. The name of the shop is Taniguchi *Gakko Soba*, and it re-purposes the former Taniguchi Branch School of Kaneyama Municipal Elementary School (Fig. 2). The enterprise is run by the non-profit organization (NPO) “*Shiki no Gakko*

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Taniguchi.” Regular farming experience workshops are also held. Almost 14 years have already passed since the “school” opened, but both the Taniguchi *Gakko Soba* restaurant and the farming experience workshops are still thriving.

However, the fact is that Kaneyama originally had no connection at all to the production of buckwheat. The township’s main industries are timber from Kaneyama cedar (the area is 80% under forest), paddy-farming on land cleared on the plain and in the mountains, and construction (Fig. 3). Most of the local paddy farmers need second jobs apart from wet-rice farming to get by (Sudou 1997). Nevertheless, when Taniguchi Branch School in Taniguchi hamlet closed down, it was taken as an opportunity to begin the production of buckwheat in this traditionally rice-harvesting area. This new departure was one of a number of community development initiatives, along with holding farming experience workshops and running the *soba* restaurant. What is more, these initiatives are highly distinctive in that they were conceived by the local people themselves, and the same people have developed and broadened them within the scope of their own abilities. Against this backdrop, growing buckwheat has progressively spread all over the township as a means of crop diversification, and it now ranks second to paddy-farming in terms of area under cultivation.



Fig. 1 Study area



Fig. 2 Exterior of Taniguchi Gakko Soba



Fig. 3 Paddy landscape in Kaneyama Township

Taking the *Shiki no Gakko* Taniguchi initiatives as an example, this chapter will look at how buckwheat—a crop that was not harvested at all in the locality—has been positioned as a local food in these community development initiatives. Working from this example, we will consider the possibilities for creating a new relationship with the environment through food.

2 Buckwheat Restaurant Born from the Re-purposing of an Abandoned School

Taniguchi hamlet is a farming settlement of thirty-three households situated in mountainous country in the north-western part of Kaneyama Township. Taniguchi Branch School of Kaneyama Elementary School was a feature of the hamlet from 1950 to 1996. Apart from its obvious function of educating the local children, the Branch School also served as a cultural and social hub for the community that it symbolized. The school's central place in the locality can be seen in how the local residents of the time paid the costs for its construction, including the site, the labor costs, and the wages involved. However, because of the falling numbers of local children, it was decided that the school would close its doors in 1996.

With the school's closure now a direct prospect, the question arose of what should be done with its buildings, which would remain. They were aging, and opinions were voiced that they would need to be dismantled if a way of putting them to use could not be found. However, local residents were both uneasy about losing this vital community platform, and strongly committed to finding some way to re-purpose the buildings and put them to use again. When the Village Office offered to entrust the maintenance and management of the Branch School to the community with the buildings in their current state at the time, the offer was accepted and the Taniguchi Branch School Management Committee was set up by both local supporters and others from outside the area. However, the decision to maintain and manage the school buildings meant that 250,000 yen a year would have to somehow be found to pay for ground rent, repairs, and so on.

It was at this point that running farming experience workshops and a buckwheat cuisine restaurant emerged as potential ways to put the Branch School to use. The first of these initiatives, the farming experience workshops, was given the title "*Shiki no Gakko* Taniguchi." Classes were held four times a year, covering farming experience, edible wild plant harvesting, *soba*-making experience, rice-cake making, and snow-clearing from rooves, among other topics. All of them initiated the participants into the activities of the local people's daily lives. This approach was triggered by the rise of green tourism at the time. The second initiative, the "*Taniguchi Gakko Soba*" handmade buckwheat cuisine restaurant, was conceived as a way to pay for the upkeep of the school buildings. The target clientele includes not only local residents but also urban dwellers, such as local people returning home from the cities. In terms of geographical spread, the target area is not confined

to Yamagata Prefecture and the Sendai area. With visitors coming to study and observe from across Japan, it covers the entire country.

3 The Current Management System

The current NPO *Shiki no Gakko* Taniguchi grew out of the volunteer Taniguchi Branch School Management Committee when it was legally incorporated in 2005. The NPO consists of 11 members, and the Taniguchi *Gakko Soba* restaurant is run by an all-woman staff of eight. There are thirty-three farming households of Taniguchi hamlet (Table 1). Of the settlement's inhabitants who are involved in these initiatives, two are men in their fifties, two are men in their sixties, two are women in their fifties, four are women in their sixties, and one is a woman in her seventies, a total of 11 people. The female participants are mainly involved in running the *soba* restaurant. In employment terms, almost all of the participants are either working in agriculture or in other local industries. The reason why the farming experience school and the *soba* restaurant are not run right through the week is because priority lies with the participants' jobs and various everyday activities. Now that the *soba* restaurant is doing well, its proceeds can cover not just upkeep of the school buildings but also staff salaries and management expenses. As a result, the project has stabilized and achieved continuity.

4 Creating a New Relationship with the Environment Through Food

As mentioned above, Kaneyama Township had neither buckwheat growing nor a culture of *soba* in its past, nor was the idea of opening a *soba* restaurant based on any special reason in particular; it was just that *soba* was enjoying a surge in popularity nationwide among an increasingly health-conscious public. However, this rice-growing area, as a matter of course, had no one with any experience in making *soba* noodles by hand. So, local people traveled outside the area to learn the techniques and be trained, and skilled *soba*-makers were also invited to visit and impart their skills. As of now, the flour used to make the noodles is 100% locally grown, and it is local homemakers who make the noodles by hand. The restaurant stays open for an extended period of days during the *O-bon* holidays. There are over 100 customers on some of these days, and at present an average of about 15,000 customers per year.

Apart from the novelty factor of a *soba* restaurant doing business in an abandoned school, *soba* cuisine in this context is positioned as a dining forum for interaction with urban dwellers and local community residents. It is not the case that the natural environment of Kaneyama Township was ever basically unsuitable for

Table 1 Households of Taniguchi farming settlement in Kaneyama Township

Household	Farm land(are)		Male labour force								Female labour force								Agricultural Machines			
	Total	Rice Others	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	Tractor	Rice Planting	Combine	Drier		
1	1300	1000 (buckwheat)		△		●	●	●	□		△		●	●	●	□	○	○	○	○		
2	600	500 (dent corn)			●		●		□		◎			●		□	△	△	△	△		
3	550	500 (vegetable)				●		□						▲			○	○	○	○		
4	530	450 (dent corn)			○		▲						◎				○	○	○	○		
5	440	400 (oats)					◎		□				◎				□	□	□	□		
6	415	400 (buckwheat)					◎						○				○	○	○	○		
7	400	400 (buckwheat)				◎			○				□				○	○	○	○		
8	400	400 (buckwheat)				●			□				△				△	△	△	△		
9	340	300 (buckwheat)			△		◎		△				△				○	○	○	○		
10	330	280 (buckwheat)				○		◎					○		▲		○	○	○	○		
11	290	290 (buckwheat)			△		◎						○				○	○	○	○		
12	280	270 (garric)				▲							◎				○	○	○	○		
13	220	220 (buckwheat)				◎		●					◎				○	○	○	○		
14	200	200			○		●						○				○	○	○	○		
15	200	200				◎							□				△	△	△	△		
16	200	200					▲		□				●				○	○	○	○		
17	190	170					◎						●		□		○	○	○	○		
18	180	180			○		◎		□				□				○	○	○	○		

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

	170	150															
19		170	150	⊙										⊙	□	○	×
20		150	150	⊙	△	□								□	○	×	×
21		100	90		△	⊙	⊙				□	□			○	×	×
22		20	0		△	⊙	⊙					●			×	×	×
23		15	0			□						●			×	×	×
24		10	0				○				□				×	×	×
25		10	0		△										×	×	×
26		0	0		△										×	×	×
27		0	0			□									×	×	×
28		0	0		○	□									×	×	×
29		0	0				○								×	×	×
30		0	0		△										○	×	×
31		0	0												□	×	×
32		0	0		△		△								□	×	×
33		0	0		□		○								□	×	×

Date Source: field survey in 2009

Note: ●Full-time Farmer ▲Mainly Engaged in Farming ⊙Part-time Farmer

○Other Job(Inside of the town) △Other Job(outside of the Town) □Out of Work or Housewife

The people which engaged in "NPO Shiki no Gakko Taniguchi" are shown by half-tone dot meshing.

growing *soba*; rather, the crop was not produced because no economic or practical rationale had ever been found to do so. Now, however, a practical rationale for growing *soba* has been found—that is, supplying ingredients to a *soba* restaurant being run for the upkeep of a disused school. The value of *soba* cuisine was thus discovered through its consumption by people who sympathized with the culture and lifestyle of the locality.

The term “foodstuffs” refers not only to products derived from nature; it also covers the processes of preservation and preparation (among others) that convey it to the human palate, thereby forming the basis of human life. Advances in refrigeration and transportation technology have made it possible for foodstuffs to be consumed in places far from where they are produced. Nevertheless no matter how far away agricultural products can be transported from where they are grown, the experience of sitting down to a meal of locally produced foods, cooked in the local style and shaped by the area itself, is something that can never be shipped elsewhere (Ikemoto 2008). This is why the handmade *soba* noodles served at the Taniguchi *Gakko Soba* restaurant can only be consumed in this particular spot. The example of Kaneyama Township offers us an understanding of how individuals can coalesce to rebuild their distinctive local culture and lifestyle, in this case by maintaining and activating a disused school by offering diners a unique and non-reproducible experience.

The author does not consider the idea of our “relationship with the environment” to be merely about the natural environment; nature itself is transformed by human intervention, and this transformed nature is in turn understood and experienced by human beings as being buried deep in their own lives in human society. Moreover, our relationship with the environment is by no means fixed; when we understand this relationship as being historically shaped, the initiatives undertaken in Kaneyama Township allow us to visualize the process of creating a new relationship with the environment through food. The reason is that buckwheat and *soba* noodles, which had not been a feature of the locality before, have permeated through community development initiatives into the area’s farming production and to some extent into its social life, and have begun to construct new resources for the community. Insofar as this development is understood as a “relationship with the environment,” no immediate evaluation of it is possible. However, if we can visualize the process whereby the cuisine (food), which has been created, develops into a relationship with the environment (*fudo*), we may be able to visualize how what is taken to be a “relationship with the environment” (wherever the particular locality may be) is not some latent or inherent presence but rather a product of human activity and intervention over time.

5 Postscript–The Present Situation

Shiki no Gakko Taniguchi had its twentieth anniversary in 2017. With its membership growing older, it was decided that the group would shut down that February. At the same time, this meant that there was no choice but to close the Taniguchi *Gakko Soba* restaurant. However, this was not to be the end of the enterprise. A great many people, both locals and tourists who had visited the restaurant, voiced their regrets about its closure, and their desire to see it stay in business. A young group of interested supporters from Tokyo set up a “Local Revitalization Enterprise Cooperative” and took over the running of the Taniguchi *Gakko Soba* restaurant in April 2017.

What this development suggests is that this initiative, which has prevailed for 20 years, has been appreciated not just by local residents but also by outside visitors to the area, and this has allowed the initiative to take root as an aspect of the locality’s unique culture and business life. It appears that the initiative has finally been recognized as a resource of major value for the locality. Furthermore, as we can see from the fact that the management of this enterprise has been taken over by people from outside the locality, the conditions whereby it has generated its appeal up to the present are now ready to be recast in a new configuration.

This chain of events may offer us further opportunity to grasp the fact that the “relationship with the environment” is shaped by human beings’ proactive usage of their surroundings, and that this “nature” is in turn incorporated by human beings into their own lives in human society.

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