

Activating Wendell Berry's Concept of "Connection" Through "Communication"

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"Connection" is one of the most important concepts in Wendell Berry's writings. For instance, in his essay "The Body and the Earth" he writes:

What I have been trying to do is to define a pattern of disintegration that is at once cultural and agricultural. I have been groping for connections — that I think are indissoluble, though obscured by modern ambitions — between the spirit and the body, the body and other bodies, the body and the earth. (118)

I would like to argue that Wendell Berry's concept of "connection" can be understood more widely and in a more fruitful way, especially in Japan, when it is activated or used in conjunction with the term "communication." In my recent research I have discovered that the ideas of the Japanese writer and amateur farmer, Fujimoto Toshio,¹⁾ coincide with and lend considerable support to Berry's position on major points.

Fujimoto Toshio [1944-2002] was a leader of the student protest movement in the 1960s. As president of the Save the Earth Association (*Dichi wo Mamoru-kai*), he contributed to disseminating the idea of organic farming and organized the distribution system of organic products in Japan. He was the leader of and presided over an ecological farm and a network to protect the environment and human life. Fujimoto submitted a proposal to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan in 2002. He proposed to the Ministry the idea of making an agriculture-based sustainable society by calling on the entire country to participate in a half-farmer half-X lifestyle that included cooperation between urban consumers and rural professional farmers.

In his writings, Fujimoto used the term "communication," as follows:

Dare I say it, that industrialism does not have the power to create a new age with a new civilization. What industrialism can do is simply to make machines and other goods externalize human abilities. In such things you cannot feel an actual sense of life. In

a mass-production-mass-consumption society, machines have a tendency not to induce people to develop their self-realization abilities, but on the contrary to allow them to degenerate. Agriculture, however, as a communication medium between the universe and the human being, awakens people's creativity and induces us to enter a grand chain of life, or the cycle of rebirth, or as we say in Japanese, *rinne*. (*Gendai Yuki-nogyo Kokoroe* 30)

Today, with ecology being a somewhat fashionable term, to speak of the relationship between the body and other bodies, or between the body and the earth, using the term "connection" is perfectly fine. Yet to speak of "the connections that join people, land, and community . . ." as Berry does ("People, Land, and Community" 182), we may need to be careful so as not to exclude from the discussion urbanites who have no relatives or background in rural areas and those who are neither engaged in agriculture nor own farmland. We can avoid this, I believe, by expressing "connection" in terms of "communication." While translating Berry's agrarian essays from *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* edited by Norman Wirzba into Japanese²⁾ and at the same time reading Fujimoto's works, I realized that the use of the term "communication" may prevent a serious social backlash in Japan and perhaps even go further than that.

Exactly what kind of "serious social backlash" do I foresee when Wendell Berry's agrarian essays are translated into Japanese? His agrarian ideas are very likely to be labeled by some readers as "reactionary conservatism," or even worse, as "the revival of the pre-World War agrarianism (*nohonshugi*) which fueled nationalism/fascism in the 1930s and led to World War II." Such stereotyped negative labeling has been quite common in Japan for the past sixty years, particularly when critics discuss agricultural leaders or reformers from the late 19th century through the Second World War. Possibly this can happen to Wendell Berry because many of his key ideas have almost identical Japanese expressions that have connotations linked to the nationalism/ fascism that was prevalent prior to World War II. Some of the ideas and terms Berry uses are: "connection" and its developed forms like "local community," the importance of a "self-sufficient," "decentralized" "local economy" based on "sustainable agriculture," or the notion of "health" found in rural society, love of the "homeland," the importance of "family" and "small farm" or the lifestyle, culture and traditional mind rooted in the local native "earth."

Consequently we may infer that Wendell Berry will be compared with several pre-World War II Japanese agrarians (*nohonshugi-sha*), most notably Yokoi Tokiy-

oshi (横井時敬. 1860-1927), and Tachibana Kozaburo (橘孝三郎 1893-1974), Okada Yutaka (岡田温 1870-1969), Yamazaki Nobuyoshi (山崎延吉 1873-1954) and Sengoku Kotaro (千石興太郎 1874-1950). All of these people have been categorized as pre-War reactionaries who promulgated establishment ideologies, in spite of their great leadership and efforts on both philosophical and practical levels to help farmers, rural communities and the agricultural industry struggling to survive within a forcibly expanding capitalist economy. These men, and the ideologies they espoused are believed to have represented, defended, and praised the half-feudalistic landlord system that provided the basis for the development of the Empire since the Meiji era. One of them, Tachibana, organized an idealistic farm, Brothers Village (*Kyodai-mura*) and the Love for the Homeland Association (*Aikyo-juku*). Influenced greatly by Tolstoy first, then inclining to the Emperor cult, Tachibana said:

All those who destroy the soil will destroy themselves, too. (Tsunazawa 131)

No matter how big metropolitan Tokyo may grow and urban business-industries may develop, also no matter how severely rural villages may be trampled down, this country (Japan) is still essentially an agricultural country. (Tsunazawa 132)

Wendell Berry's words hold a similar admonition. He says:

A nation will destroy its land and therefore itself if it does not foster in every possible way the sort of thrifty, prosperous, permanent rural households and communities that have the desire, the skills, and the means to care properly for the land they are using. ("Conservation and Local Economy" 196)

However, Tachibana was firmly stigmatized as an ultra-nationalistic emperor cultist who played a leading role in planning the May 15th Incident (*Goichigo-jiken*), an act of terror that aimed to reform the country during the Great Depression in the 1930s.³⁾ These negative views of pre-War agrarians became established, as is well known, through the influence of political scientist Maruyama Masao and his followers, the so called "liberal intellectuals (*shinpoteki-bunkajin*)," in the years after World War II.⁴⁾

It is both sad and unfortunate to deny, forsake or disregard agrarian ideas, efforts and philosophy because of an unfortunate relationship to the forces responsible for an imperialistic war. Even if we should severely condemn Japanese fascism and its war of invasion, isn't it superficial or close to self-deception to keep denying all of

agrarianism by focusing on indigenous characteristics in a negative way? Recently, however, we can find some people who are attempting a reevaluation of pre-war agrarianism. The afore-mentioned Fujimoto is one of them. As his expression “agriculture as a communication medium between the universe and the human being” implies, his concept of communication includes not only the usual sense of “sending and receiving information” but also the sense of “transportation” and the sense of “sharing” or “partaking of something.” Therefore it could mean “sharing” and “partaking of” a community, both in the sense of a human community and in the sense of an ecological community. That kind of communication is possible through the physical experience of cultivating “life” and taking in “life.” Thus Fujimoto’s idea of “agriculture as a communication medium” is identical with Wendell Berry’s idea of agriculture as “connections that join people, land, and community.” The only difference is that the term “communication” expresses a sense of movement while the term “connection” expresses the sense of a fixed state. Particularly when it is translated into Japanese, it seems to me that the term “communication,” with the help of its positive image of movement, could involve a wider range of people and other existences.

By “wider range” I mean both in a spatial sense and in a temporal sense. Fujimoto’s agrarianism involves a spatially wider range of people by calling for urban consumers to take part in agricultural production as part-time farmers and thereby communicating more frequently and more openly with farmers and rural people. This kind of spatial communication often gives urban people experiences of now forgotten traditional, indigenous ways of living, and in that sense involves communication with people from long ago. This orientation toward the past is, to be sure, reactionary in a sense, yet not simply so. It is said that agrarianism came to the forefront of history in response to the situation in which agriculture found itself in decline, struggling at a relatively lower position compared with other industries on the nation’s economic ladder. In other words, every time agriculture was in crisis, unconscious agrarianism transformed itself into conscious agrarianism by asserting its own essential role to sustain the society.

A wider range of communication will become possible
through agriculture as a communication medium.

(SPATIALLY) not only among rural producers

→ but also among urban consumers and others in the universe
(nature)

[The focus is shifting from a narrow communication which pays attention only to agriculture as one industry among many, to a wider communication which focuses more on the common ground for farmers, consumers and others living on the earth.]

(TEMPORALLY) not only among people in the present

→ but also concerning people in the past and in the future

[The concept of sustainability necessarily requires a shift from the communication within a narrow time span to the communication extending over a wider time span, paying respect to old ways which have proven sustainable and leaving for future generations messages of goodwill and trust in the form of good land and culture.]

Philosopher Nakamura Yujiro points out,

Gemeinschaft-oriented traditionalism, which presents itself as a "counter culture" against "modernization," has not only a "reactionary" aspect but also a positive aspect which prompts practically, so to speak, an indigenous "modernization" by its logic, and through a process of adapting itself and strengthening its position in the modernizing trend. (Nakamura 277)

So agrarianism as a "counter culture" is not necessarily a backward negative movement, but possibly could be a positive movement. (Nomoto 7) In the opinions of both Wendell Berry and Fujimoto, the positive point of agrarianism as a "counter culture" lies in valuing sustainability. The concept of sustainability necessarily requires a shift from the communication within a narrow time span to the communication extending over a wider time span, paying respect to old ways which have proven sustainable and leaving for future generations messages of goodwill and trust in the form of good land and culture. What is important here is that the agrarian "counter culture" trends today in Japan – Fujimoto's agrarian movement is just one of them – can expand the communication range widely enough to include urban consumers as well as farmers only because both groups have started to pay attention not simply to agriculture as an industry but also to the idea that the whole of their daily lives (*seikatsu*) – their work, their family, their health, their dreams –

can be regarded as the common ground between industrialized farmers and urban consumers. Formerly mentioned criticism against the pre-war agrarians regarded agriculture simply as one of many industries and paid attention only to farmers and their productivity, not to their lives. The Government agricultural policy is still on the same track in Japan. Because they still regard farming only as another industry, they are trying in vain to find some way to expand farms to sizes large enough to be viable in the world market. This obstinate line of agricultural policy of the Japanese Government is, of course, due to pressure from the world market and from the WTO. The Government and the WTO officials need to reconsider this policy carefully.

An economist's remark may help their re-examination. The well-known economist, Uzawa Hirofumi (1928-) member and associate of the United States National Academy of Sciences, and ex-professor at the University of Chicago and Tokyo University said:

Agriculture in Japan is facing the most serious crisis since the World Depression in the 1930s. (Uzawa 46)

I think we would be better off by focusing our discussion on agricultural activities rather than on the concept of agriculture as an industry. It seems to me we can regard agricultural activities to be as old as human history. In other words, we can say the definition of agricultural activities is what has provided for the existence and the unique characteristics of human beings. (47)

In contrast to Japanese Government policy, the number of people who are beginning to regard agricultural activities as a more important and basic part of their lives is increasing. Notwithstanding the government's guidelines, people are finding part-time small farms more enjoyable and high-mix-crops/low-volume production more practical than full time, large-scale professional farms producing rice or other staples. If it is only full-time, large-scale farmers who care about agriculture, the plight of farming today would never be solved. Both large-scale industrialized farmers and ignorant, irresponsible consumers have been responsible for -- and will most likely continue to be responsible for — the worsening situation of the farming problems raised in Berry's and Fujimoto's writings. When an agrarian counter-culture is shared through communication by more people working in various fields and living in geographically and temporally wider ranges, the more promising it will be. Wendell Berry's agrarian essays, then, will show Japanese people that the

ongoing "counter culture" is shared by American people as well. And I am sure they will inspire people to help make the agrarian lifestyle all the more promising.

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Notes

- 1) In this article the names of Japanese people are written according to the Japanese order, that is, family name followed by given name.
- 2) Wendell Berry's writings translated into Japanese so far: *Standing by Words: Essays* (*Kotoba to Tachiba* 言葉と立場. Trans. Tani Eriko 谷恵理子. Tokyo: Maruju-sha, 1995) "Thoughts in the Presence of Fear" (Osore wo maeni-shite omou 恐れを前にして想う. *Hisen* 非戦. Ed. Sakamoto Ryuichi 坂本龍一. Tokyo: Gento-sha, 2002) *Life Is a Miracle* (*Lai fu izu mirakuru* ライフ・イズ・ミラクル. Trans. Mikuni Chiaki 三國千秋. Tokyo: Hosei Daigaku Shppankyoku, 2005)
- 3) On 15 May 1932 (*Showa* 7), Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi was assassinated by young naval officers in what is now called the May 15th Incident (*Goichigo-jiken*). Several young farmers who had been Tachibana's disciples took part in this uprising.
- 4) It is said that Maruyama Masao's "Nihon Fascism no shiso to undo" 日本ファシズムの思想と運動 (Japanese Fascism and its Movement, 1947) set the trend of being critical about pre-war agrarianism. See Nomoto Kyoko's *Senzen-ki pezanteizumu no keifu: Nouhonshugi no saikento* 戦前期ペザンティズムの系譜——農本主義の再検討 (A Genealogical Study on the Pre-War Peasantism: Reconsidering the Agrarianism).

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