Respondent: Abe san

Date and time: 4 March 2019, 2 pm

Q: interviewer A: Interviewee

Q: I would like to ask you some questions about your farming background first. Why did you start farming?

A: Hmm... why do I? I used to be a photographer, especially photojournalism field and I was visiting all the Asian countries and see people rice farming, and after the earthquake of Tohoku and the explosion of Fukoshima, I want to live somewhere else...and I would like to do what people are doing in Asia, I want to do the same thing...

Q: Can you tell me more about what those Asian people were doing?

A: I visited East Timo, and I made a book about their houses, that took two or three weeks. At that time, I was helping rice planting and picking coffee beans, while I was taking pictures, and... that’s why I wanted to do it. I often visited Thailand too, and I have seen all those beautiful rice fields and see people living very ‘rich’.

Q: You want to live that kind of lifestyle, or...?

A: If you are a photojournalist, you are basically traveler you know... moving all the places and never stop, but I wanted to stop sometimes.

Q: When did you start farming?

A: Three years ago, I came here and learnt how to make rice, and then... last two years I made rice by myself. This year, this is my third time.

Q: How did you learn it?

A: I had a teacher, the same teacher as Kudo, we had the same teacher. That was 2016, I came here.

Q: Before that, where did you live in Japan.

A: Kawasaki, that’s my home town.

Q: Have you lived in the countryside before?

A: I did, in the US. I went to college in Missouri, the very center of the US, and Kansas is very countryside.

Q: Can you tell me the characteristics of your farming practices?

A: I did not think much, I just do the same things as what I learnt from Kikuchi san, he doesn’t use chemicals and sundried, but I used machines, small machines...When I did rice planting, I used my hands, when I harvested, I used machine, the binder (The machine that cuts and binds the rice straws).

Q: Do you have any thoughts about what farming style is it? Or you just followed the teacher?

A: I don’t care much about style, all I want to do is just not using chemicals and sundry rice. (He does not want to be too labor-intensive, too much labour is not good for you)

Q: I see, just like Tanaka san he does everything by hands, but you prefer to have some machinery assistance.

A: He is too extreme!

Q: Is there any particular reason why you do not want to use chemicals and sundry the rice?

A: Hmm... not really. I think it is safe, and the rice I want my children to eat.

Q: Do you sell your rice?

A: Yes,

Q: By yourself?

A: yes.

Q: Through what channels?

A: Through my friends and the internet.

Q: Do you face any challenges when you are farming here?

A: The hardest thing is to sell. When I came here, I thought...okay I want to make rice, but after you make rice, you have to think about how to sell, it is kind of a difficult part to me.

Q: Why?

A: Because the organic rice is more expensive, if I don’t make it, I am not gonna buy, it is too expensive. I can’t afford it. I make something I cannot afford, so I don't know how to sell. I know it’s good...but at the same time it’s expensive, I have to explain why the rice is good and why it is expensive, that’s something I don’t want to do. Fortunately, I was able to sell all of it, it takes time.

Q: Apart from selling rice, did you face other challenges in starting rice farming when you had never done it before.

A: I think I don't have many challenges because I don’t set my goals very high. I take what I got, so if the weather was not good, I gave up. I try not to do hard you know... I followed the weather.

Q: Do you have any positive experiences after you started farming here?

A: I enjoy every day.

Q: You mean the lifestyle, or the environment?

A: I enjoy living here, sometimes it is hard to make rice, you have to weed... I hate all the bugs. It’s hard but I would say I’m having fun here.

Q: How would you compare your life here, than the life you previously lived in the city?

A: I used to live near Roppongi, the center of Tokyo (the popular party place in Tokyo, a lot of bars, party people and foreigners, the district is super crowded and does not go to sleep). I lived in Roppongi in early thirties, and now I am late forties. I enjoyed the life in Roppongi, but life stage changed. Now, I don't miss there, and I like here. So, I never compare my life, I just do what I wanna do right now. I wasn’t party people, I was drunken, but now I don’t drink much. (If you hear someone living in Roppongi, that person is party people, or drunken people)

Q: Now I will ask you questions about the artworks, before I ask you the questions, I will show you pictures of the artworks first. Can you pick an artwork that can most illustrate your farming here?

A: My favorite is this one, this one and this one. I have never been this one, but I like the picture (The Rice House). This one (The Rice Field), the letter is the artwork or the silhouettes?

Q: I think the whole combination is the work.

A: I like the blue figures.

Q: Which one would you like to talk about?

A: Hmm.... (Translator explaining the question) I never think about it that way, so it is very difficult to answer.

T: Maybe the reason why those pieces are his favorite could be something?

A: I could say that maybe those artworks are one of reasons why I come here, it is nice to see those artworks in daily life, but when you walk on the field, I never think about those. I don’t know the relations between artworks and my farming, I’m not sure if there is any relationship, but my wife and kid really enjoy going around with the artworks last year, so our life is related to those artworks, but… but when I think about the relationship of the artworks with my farming… I don’t know….

Q: Maybe you can share with the messages you get from these messages I show you now, and what imaginations do they trigger? What about the art pieces you like here?

A: I like this one (human re-entering nature) just because they don’t cut the grasses, that’s the way nature should be…and maybe our rice terraces here may become like this in the future because no one makes rice here.

T: Yes, it’s super easy to get situation like this if you don’t weed.

A: Yes, so I think this might be the future of the area, and also this one (Seppuku Pistols), the way they dress and perform, it is from the past. So, this one (human re-entering nature) is the future version and this one is from the past (Seppuku Pistols).

Q: what do you mean by the past? Can you explain more?

A: I mean, I could know the way people live here before from the way they dress, the sound they make, so that’s why it feels like the voice from the past.

T: It’s funny, I think that’s because their concept is more like primitive, it is not modern. It is the style that Japan had had more than 100 years ago, their style and their way to communicate their passion from the Edo era, that’s their style.

Q: what do you like about this style?

A: I like it…but I won’t dress in this way… I like to see people wearing and Kudo san is my good friend, I love him wearing this kind of clothes and I love to hear the music of Seppuku Pistols.

Q: How would you position your farming from the past you saw there and the future you perceive from the artwork. How do you see your present?

A: I know…I understand. I don’t want to be like this (human re-entering nature), but I do not want to feel any responsibility for those lands because I’m an outsider, I’m just doing what I want here. So, no responsibility, but if there are more people coming like me, and do what they want, it might keep the landscape in the future too. So… I want more people to come but…but…I don’t know about my role here.

Q: You feel that you come here to do what you want, living the kind of life you want, but … for no responsibility, what do you mean? You mean you do not have any attachment to the community, or …

A: Ah…I have a social life here with the people here in the village, that’s because I like it, but…

T: I think I kind of understand, I feel no responsibility for what I do, I just do what I want to do, and that’s not for this region or for this village. I think about the future, like if I could contribute to the social and the village, and this community, that would be good, but I don’t feel any responsibility that I have to do it. I think this is the same way…

A: Too much…

T: yes, it is not my…I just feel that that’s not my role, but if I do can contribute then it’s good. It is not that we have to do, we do what we want to do and if that is contributing to the community, that’s good. I think this is the meaning he said about not having responsibility.

A: But I still enjoy having social life here, lots of nice people and… some people do not want to join the activities…like cutting the grasses.

T: Like volunteering work for the village to conservation, we all have those volunteering work, all the villagers have to contribute to maintain the road and conserve the nature in the mountain. We do a little, considering the area that the village has, or the mountain the village has, it’s so little we could do, but we still do the volunteering work to weed, that’s the social task to live in the village. In the city, we don’t this kind of works, it only happens in the countryside.

A: I still enjoy all those volunteer works and you know… I feel that I have the responsibility to do it, to keep our village clean. But when you ask me about the big vision of this land in the future, you know… I don’t feel any responsibility. So…what I could say… I do what I can do, you know… and what I can do is just making rice in the field and…that’s it.

Q: You mentioned that you like the weed because it is how the nature should be like, and when I asked you about your farming styles, you also mentioned that you just follow the weather and take what you got. How would you relate that to your observation about the weed?

A: Just let it be because… the population is decreasing, that’s the fact. I think we cannot live the way we used to live. When the population is decreasing, maybe some of the land should go back to nature, you know. That’s the part of the history, you know.

Q: You mean some of the lands should go back to how it was like originally, before it was cultivated?

A: Yes. I don’t want to reject all those fates, destiny… so just let it be, you know, and I could do what I do. With my farming style, maybe I could only cultivate 2,500 m2, that’s what I can do now, I just want to do more just to conserve those lands of the neighbours. So, that’s why I love this artwork, I can see the future of this land.

Q: You mentioned that you also do photography, do you combine your photography with farming? How would you relate it to farming?

A: Ah, I take pictures every day, and I might make a book around here in the future, so…

Q: Why do you take pictures of your farm? Just to take record or…?

A: To record the life here with the family and my farm.

Q: How would you relate taking photos with farming?

T: It’s hard, everything is related…

Q: When you take pictures, what are the moments that make you take the picture, like ‘oh, I have to take a picture of this, I have to record this’. What are the thoughts behind each picture?

A: I never think, haha!

T: He captured moment! I can see that he captured moment by his picture. I think… you have to catch the moment.

A: But I have been taking pictures for so long, I take pictures like I breathe, you know… this is something I like and something I want to do, taking picture of family and nature around here. But if you live in Kawasaki, you have to live and take pictures of all those actors and actresses, all those are things I don’t care, it supports my livelihood. But here, I do what I want to do, making rice, and taking pictures I like. So, if I farm here and take pictures here, no pressure and no stress.

Q: Can you show me some of your pictures?

A: Yes.

(Browsing through his Instagram)

T: That’s the painting of his wife, the lady over there. She is an artist.

A: She is a painter.

Q: Most of them are your son.

A: Yes, he is the center of my life now.

Q: Did you bring him to your farm?

A: Sometimes, yes.

Q: Most of your pictures are records of your life here. So it is difficult for you to relate photography to your farming, but it is more about recoding different moments in your daily life?

A: What I am doing right now is… what people are doing in front of my camera before.

Q: What do you mean?

T: He has been in other Asian countries as a photographer, his life right now is what those people he was taking pictures of was doing.

A: And…before when I was taking pictures, I always thought that I want to do this kind of life, so that’s why I’m doing it right now. So… as a photographer, I must observe everything, but I did not do anything, I just do what people are doing, but I always wanted to do the same thing.

T: Oh, when you were taking picture of them?

A: Yes.

Q: Now you are doing it yourself, and you are also taking pictures of what you are doing.

A: Yes, and taking pictures of kid.

Q: How do you feel about the differences now?

A: Differences?

T: Of his previous life?

Q: Yes. You are still doing the same action of clicking the shutter, but the image that you are capturing in front of you is different.

A: My pictures now are very personal, also I put those on Instagram but I don’t care if other people see my photos or not. As a photojournalist, you have to take photos and tell story to people, it’s very different but taking pictures is still the same thing. So, I don’t really feel the difference between my life now and my life previously, and... but the other people might think in different way. I don’t know… no change.

Q: So to you, you think there is no change?

A: No…

T: He is just doing what he wanna do at the moment he wanna do, so that’s … maybe the style of how he lives changed, but he wants does not change, he is just making it happen in his life. He is always making the things that he wanted to do come true.

A: There is no big differences.

Q: I see. I would like to ask the last question about the ETAT in general. Do you think the art festival offered any opportunities to you as a farmer?

A: The art festival makes my life rich for sure, I enjoy watching the artworks everyday, driving around the artworks everyday. I love to see many people coming, but no one bought my rice.

Q: Did you try to sell?

A: No, at that time I sold everything before the Art Triennale. But now I’m roasting my coffee, maybe in the next Triennale, I might sell my coffee, but I’m not sure. Last year, I really enjoyed watching artworks, but next time I might enjoying communications between me and people coming here. But I still do not know about the relations between art and farming.

T: It’s hard.

Q: It’s okay.

A: I really love seeing those artworks when I drive every day, that’s enough for me, really good. Sometimes, there are artworks I don’t like, but it’s okay.

T: Did you know about this art festival before you came here?

A: Yes.

T: Is that the reason why you moved here?

A: Yes, not the main reason. My wife is from Niigata Prefecture and we were talking about to move to Niigata, we were talking about which area we should move in, and this area is… we picked this area just because of the art festival. My wife used to help her friend’s artworks here, so she sometimes come here, that’s why I think …

Q: I see.

A: I sometimes try to read the concept of the artist, sometime I agree, sometime I don’t care, sometimes I don’t even read. But I love to see something that someone is trying to do…

Q: I see…you like exploring the artworks and trying to understand what does it mean.

A: Yes.