Interviewee: Seto san

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Q: Interviewer A: Interviewee T: translator

Q: When did he start farming?

A: 32 years ago.

Q: Did he grow up here?

A: He is from next town, it is part of the Kashiwasaki city.

Q: Why did he start?

A: He was in Tokyo, he grew up in here but he went to Tokyo, he came back 32 years ago. His father was involved in the farming business, his father said if he came back, he would expand the business, so they have a rice factory, they can handle everything and process the rice as a product. He came back 32 years ago, about running those rice centre, they only run for two months in autumn. His grandfather was doing farming and the business too, his father actually did not do any farming. His father's business was about graining the rice. At that time, they used the subsidy from the government to set up a rice factory in town. His father was asked to run the factory by the government, they are making flour that kind of stuffs, that's his family background. His father was not a farmer, his family does not have their own land, but his grandfather was a farmer. His uncle was taking care of the farmlands and doing the farmland, that is the elder brother of his father, his father is the youngest son, so he just helped on running the business. When he developed his own family, he just took over the business part, not the farming lands. He came back and took over his grandfather's job, grandchildren taking care of grandfather's job. It is a rare case in his generation at that time. It was not popular to come back to the countryside to start farming, usually it is the opposite. There are more people coming back now, but it wasn't like this at that time. When he came back, there were not so many businesses around, he wanted to start some businesses. There were many abandoned farmlands around, decades ago, it was popular to have silk worms, for silk worms they have to eat certain kind of leaves, there are farmlands for that specific plant. He started to grow the plant as well, the plant does not grow properly in the beginning, it takes times, maybe two or three years to grow properly. The market used to be protected, but on the fifth year, the law changed, a lot of plants were imported from China, the price became one tenth of before, this destroyed his business. Since law changed and market became open, a lot of plants came from China, almost all of them came from China. He found that if there are something coming from China and America, he couldn't make much money. But for raw things that cannot be imported, they cannot be kept fresh if imported. He started a new business about eggs, he released a lot of chickens on those abandoned fields, the chicken just went around freely. He was selling 40Yen/egg, and 300 eggs per day. The food was from local fish shops and tofu shops, he wanted to make it cheap and fresh and natural. He kept on doing that business for three years, suddenly the foxes increased in numbers. Before that in this area, people never thought of fox, but they increased in number suddenly. He couldn't believe at first, but his chickens were taken, maybe over hundreds of chickens were eaten by fox, at that time there was no electric fence, so it was like fox heaven. At that time, he started rice planting too, he rent some rice fields and he was doing organic rice with ducks, but his ducks were taken too. He was taking a little bit of the farmlands, he was having chickens on the field, he moved the chickens and turn the lands into farmlands. He expanded the farming field little by little throughout the whole process. His family business is about making flour, processing soy beans. His grandfather was doing 'general farming', like making flours from the other farmers, selling farming tools, his business is about farming. (T: now everyone has machine, but at that time they have to do it in a factory) By then, he was expanding the farmlands, he came back to his family business.

A: His family business was buying soy beans from other farmers or rice and process them and turn into a product, because the farmers were decreasing and people were worried, he started to grow the soy bean by himself then he can make a product as well. Before that, he was buying soy beans from other farmers, but they just quitted or passed away. He kind of started by himself too. People just kept quitting rice farming and farming too. He had no choice and his fields were expanding, he bought some machines and had to expand its business too. This is his 9th year to make flour, and soba as well. He started to grow wheat, soba, other than rice. Having chickens on the field, they make poos around, the soil becomes really good, he was moving the chickens around to make the soil fertile. But he quitted the chicken business, he does not do the same crops growing on the same field, he has to change it every year. It is really good for soil, that's why he started soy beans as well, it is a good cycle for him.

(Seto san drawing me the picture of his growing cycle)

In April, he put seeds in the soil, he harvested it in August, then he planted wheat in October, then he harvests in July, then soba and harvested in November.

(Discussing the soil)

A: In this Niigata Prefecture, rice field and farming fields are different. In this region, there are two kinds of soil, one can hold water, one cannot hold water at all, so there are right places to do right things. The farmers have to do the right thing on right place with right soil. In general, the Japanese government is telling everyone to make the farmland bigger because rice price is going down now, all they have to do is to expand the business and make more rice to earn more money. If you do a little bit of land for rice farming, you could only harvest a little, so the government is encouraging people to get bigger. But for the landscapes here, it is impossible to get a vast farming land or rice field, because it is steep in the mountains. His father's generation thinks that rice farming is the only way to make money and for the soil for a long time, they did the infrastructure to pump up the water, but what happened is that when they need to change the pump after several years, they have no money to change it and they never maintained those water pipes, it wasn't sustainable. If you have the rice field, it is hard to maintain because you always have to check the water condition, maintain the water pipe and pump, you have to do it by yourself, but it is impossible to do it by yourself. Those happened because they just made those lands and soil that is not for rice farming, they did it because they wanted to expand their business, but actually the land itself is not good for rice farming. So, he actually quitted what is impossible then the land is actually really good for.... In Niigata Prefecture, if you have rice terraces in one place, because the water will come up for rice farming, you cannot have farming land next to it, especially that wheat does not like water. In the picture he just showed, the wheat field was a rice field before. He changed it and turned it to a wheat field, it became such a good field for wheat.

A: Two years ago, he got 350kg of wheat per 10 arcs of land, it is a record in this region. Maybe in the Southern part of Japan, it is famous for wheat, maybe 100 more per 10 arcs, but this is record of this region, so it is really good.

(Seto san showing the picture of his wheat field)

A: Rice planting is really important, but it is against the nature's will. He just turned to something that is more suitable. This is next to the river, you can see that the land holding the water, it just comes up naturally. But for up here, it is impossible work. He tried to change the way to think about it, rice is not the best thing for farming around here. There are some more suitable things to do. He mentioned that he is not the first one to realize it, his ancestors had been doing that.

Q: Why?

A: Having only rice does not make your life rich, Japanese food has tofu, nato...only eating rice does not make your life, you have to make a lot of things other than rice. Actually the ancestors were doing this, growing different crops, but for generation, they want to earn more money, they changed all the farmlands to rice fields, abandoning those knowledge and wisdom that ancestors had. They throw it away, and make it an impossible rice field. When he was kid in his village, there are almost no shops now, but when he was a kid, there was tofu shops, and they got all the soy beans from local farmers. There was miso shop too, having those soy beans from locals too. But in the past decades, those foods just become imported. In Japan, it is getting really popular to have soy beans from China, Canada and America. I was surprised that each region in Tokamachi city, each town has their own shops, I was surprised of the culture. But it is really rare to have a tofu shop that uses soy beans from locals, they are usually using soy beans from other areas in Japan or other countries. When you go to supermarket and what it is made of, you can see that maybe some materials are from local, but the main materials are not from local, so it is kind of like fake. It is his goal to make local products made by local materials, this is what it was like when he was a kid. When he harvested the wheat, he grained the flour, or asked local shop to make soba noodles, and make beer. This is his goal, cooperating with local shops to make local products. When he grained the wheat, he used to leftover to feed the chickens, it is like a cycle. He started raising chickens again three years ago. He is not doing eggs anymore because of the chicken flu. For the chickens, he can just sell as a meat because the chicken flu season, so this is really good for him.

Q: He mentioned that people were quitting and he felt that he had no choice but taking over their lands. Why did he feel that he had no choice?

A: He thinks that the previous generation just tried to turn all the fields into rice fields for their living, even though it was not suitable. If it was in the middle of the mountains that is not accessible by machinery and cars, those farmlands should go back to how it was like before, maybe we should return it to nature. But for the farmlands or rice terraces that are near the village, or you can see from where you are living, it's not good to abandon them. It is becoming a problem, if you abandon the rice fields near human settlements, wild animals will increase in numbers, so he thinks that it is important to maintain the farmlands near the village and make them beautiful, so the village looks beautiful, that's the reason he took over the abandoned rice fields.

Q: Is he doing everything in organic way?

A: For some lands where he has JAS, he does it without chemicals and fertilization, but for other lands, he uses chemicals and fertilizations too. What he does is to put the chickens there at first, and plant other veggies afterwards, or changing the crops every year. When compared with other farmers, the amount of what has to use is much less than normal farmers, that's what's happening. No one else is doing this in Niigata Prefecture. It is two hectares of wheat.

Q: Did he face any challenges in his farming?

A: It's been hard always, every day. For whatever you do, you have to face challenges. He challenges things all the time.

Q: What makes him keep going? He changed the farming style several times.

A: He got tired of things very easily, he got bored if he keeps doing the same things. He wanted to save those elders who are working on hard on their rice terraces. By seeing them, he has always been thinking what he could do for them, they suffer too much from rice planting. You cannot convince them by words, you have to show them, they have to see it. This is what he is actually doing, by showing that there could be other possibilities, there could be other ways. He thinks that if you want to preserve the tradition, if you want to keep doing it, we can do the same thing again if it just happened 20-30 years ago, there are people who still remember what was going on or how to do it. But it was over 30 years, it was hard to do it again. What he is trying to do is ... what he heard from his father is that it was like this when he was a kid, he heard the story about it, he knew that there are not many things that are remained right now, he kind of heard from his father about how it was like when his father was a kid. This is what he is trying to do, if he keeps doing it, it could happen again in the future, this is he thinks what his role is, this is one of his motivations. It is really important that he takes over the place to keep doing it, so maybe the next generation have the chance to pay it forward.

(Seto san showing us the craftwork he made with rice straws)

A: Those things are not things that you do every day, but when you do it once, you can tell and teach the others or the next generation, that is really important.

T: I have the gun license, right now we need a gun license to shoot, but in the past there was no such a strict rule. His father was a hunter too, he started shooting when he was in junior high school. He did all the thing about what hunters do in the mountain because he followed his father, he just does not have the licence but it does not mean that he is not a hunter, but he knows everything about hunting, using the traditional tools and how to do it. He was complaining about the young hunters, they are so young, and they are taking over the hunting jobs. Some of the hunters are over 60, then it is our generation taking over the hunting jobs, and actually he knows everything about it, but he does not have the license so they do not take him seriously.

(Showing him pictures of artworks, translator explaining the artworks)

A: He loves Seppuku Pistols performance, he loves the performance of Kudo san, it is impressive.

T: Below Nobutai, there is a greeting word by local accent, he thinks that it really sucks. Because in Nobutai not many of the staff greet like that, there are actual persons there but they do not greet them, then he listened to the machine saying those friendly greetings.

A: He likes the local museum.

Q: How does he feel about having artworks on rice field?

A: It's uncomfortable, it is not in harmony, it is outstanding not in a good way.

Q: Why?

A: He knows the original view, he just does not feel compatible. Maybe those artists are modern artists, their pieces have a lot of impacts, maybe in a good way you get some strong impressions from that art piece because it has an impact by itself. But maybe in a way you feel scared or anxious from those strong impacts of those artworks, it does not feel safe. It is not only about art pieces, if you see these things (electric tower) in the mountain, it is something you do not feel in harmony. He is such a countryside people, he does not want to see something unordinary. It is something that locals or elders are not used to, that's why they feel anxious.

Q: What Seppuku Pistols, is it in harmony with life here?

A: For local people, this looks familiar, it is ordinary and closer to them. It was like this in local festival, their performance and how they dress, it just reminded him how life was like in the village when he was a kid. Thinking about the past, people keep saying it was good before, the 'good old days', remembering it in a good way, people feel safe and comfort. But for the future, we feel anxious and uncertain. The past, or what happened in the past, made people feel familiar and stable. These artworks are unordinary and unstable in everyday life. In his village, they are taking primary school to experience countryside life, he is taking 4th grade and 6th grade children. He met a girl in 4th grade, after she got out of bath, she just said 'it was like good old days'. He was amazed and asked if she had any countryside experiences before, she said she was from Tokyo and grew up there, he asked why it was the good days. She said because the view is what it is, what the good old day means...She never knew anything about it, but when she saw it, she felt this way. By talking to him right now, he just realized that maybe doing the traditional things that his father was doing, or his father was talking to him, doing those things makes him relieved and feels good, safe and comfortable.

A: There was a piece of art in Matsudai street, there is a rice that Japan was forced to buy from America, called minimum access rice. The artwork is about using the minimum access rice to make biogas, it is trying to sell the biogas to America, that is the idea of that artwork, he loves it. It has social message in that art piece, he is interested in that kind of things.

T: What he is doing by himself decades ago is against the mainstream, he is always the one who is against the mainstream. He always questions what people just accept.

A: He said that he does see things straight, he sees things from the sides where people do not see. He is a pioneer.