

Migrant hands, local profits

Chinese migrant labour changes the dynamics of oyster shucking in a traditional Japanese coastal community

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In Japan, many fishing households practice capture fishing and the farming of fish, shellfish and seaweed. All of them are members of the local Fisheries Cooperative Association (FCA). FCAs play multiple roles for the fishing community. They manage fishing and aquaculture within a few miles from the coast; provide many services to members, including input supplies and accounting; and they help with the marketing of products. FCAs are grouped into prefectural and national level federations.

Oku is a small town located in the Okayama Prefecture on the Seto inland sea. Oyster farming and fisheries are the main economic activities here. Shellfish farming was introduced in this area in 1952 by the local FCA. The objective was to provide an extra income to fisher households during winter, when fishing activity is low. The FCA began by bringing in seeds and got good results. With the introduction of raft-type cultivation in 1962, oyster production increased considerably. Oyster farming further expanded during the 1970s when fish landings were hit by overfishing and environmental degradation in the Seto inland sea. In 1980, the total

production of shucked oysters in Oku was 2,270 tons. The Japanese market required only shucked oysters. Shucking oysters—that is, peeling oysters from their shells—is a labour-intensive task. Oyster farming remained an important activity through the years. In 2011, the production of shucked oysters dropped to 1,500 tons, following reduction of the number of rafts to improve oyster quality. Eighty households were then involved in oyster farming. Until recently, the entire production of shucked oysters was marketed through the FCA. However, the low price of oysters and the limits set on the number of rafts forced oyster farmers to search for ways to reduce costs and to improve marketing.

Shucking oysters is a difficult manual task requiring agility and cheap labour. With economic growth, young women and men started to leave fishing communities to find better paid and easier jobs in cities. Women and old fishers now constitute the labour available for shucking oysters within traditional communities. Japanese rural communities are now largely populated by elderly people. Meanwhile, the producers started to develop direct sales and delivery by phone or internet rather than selling through the FCA. Oyster farmers engaging in direct sales saw their office work increase, and wives were now often employed full-time for this task. There was therefore a further shortage of labour for oyster shucking.

Oyster farmers of Oku, as in the rest of the Hiroshima production area, found the solution in employing immigrants. From early 2000, young immigrant women from China began to replace the old traditional labour done mainly by old Japanese women. Most of the land-based work in oyster farming is now performed by young Chinese women arriving in Japan under industrial training and technical programmes run by the Japan International Training Cooperation Organization (JITCO). The official objective of this project is to offer opportunities to young immigrants from developing countries to acquire the skills and techniques of a developed country. Immigrant women are authorized to stay in Japan for a period of three years, and they have to return home during the low season.

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Migrant labourers are shucking oysters in Oku farms.
Both Japanese women and migrant women entirely engage in shucking shells

In their search for added value, some of the farmers decided to process oysters to access the *delicatessen* (specially prepared food) markets. Smoked oysters in olive oil and cooked oysters are some of the products. Women's participation is very important in the development of these new value-added activities. All members of the family become involved in these profitable businesses. Farmers without young family members generally do not undertake such initiatives because of lack of family labour. With migrant workers, this situation can change.

The arrival of young immigrant women in Japanese coastal communities gave oyster farming a second lease of life. Chinese labour not only increased the speed of operations, but also provided better quality products with less damaged oysters, and at a lower cost. Another aspect is the labour regulation. The work for local women is regulated by the fishers' cooperative laws, and employees are allowed to work only from 5 am to 3 pm. Chinese women, however, are not subject to local regulations. This new situation brought a lot of changes in the organization of this activity. The maximum number of rafts per

enterprise has now been revised upward from 15 to 20 to allow for the growth of businesses. Earlier, disparities between oyster enterprises were never important in Japan, but the use of immigrant labour and development of direct sales and processing have contributed to increasing such disparities. Enterprises without the necessary resources or skills became less and less viable economically and tended to close.

Another impact is the loss of work opportunities for elderly Japanese women. This affects both their main source of income—as most of them do not receive a pension—and their sense of purpose in life. On the other hand, wives of farmers acquire new business opportunities as new products and markets develop.

The question, however, is: what is the future of this industry in Japan if it has to rely on immigrant labour? Wives of fishers and oysters farmers have created women's groups in order to maintain and regulate life within the community, and to attract young Japanese people to the fisheries sector. They have started a debate on oyster shucking and its dependence on immigrant labour. ❏

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