

Food supply and commodification of rural space: changes in the main varieties of paddy rice in the Tohoku region

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After the promulgation of the Act on Stabilization of Supply, Demand and Prices of Staple Food in 1994, paddy rice production in Japan changed dramatically in response to government deregulation. Paddy rice became one of the main cash crops as well as being a primary food-supplying crop. The process of commodifying paddy rice was accompanied by changes in the main varieties of nonglutinous paddy rice. This study examined the mechanism of commodification of regional paddy rice production by focusing on the development and adoption of new rice varieties in the Tohoku region.

The Tohoku region is one of the main paddy rice-producing centers in Japan, accounting for about 30% of the total paddy rice produced in Japan. The middle part of the region, including the Senpoku Plain and the Kitakami and Yokote Basins, is known for its large planted areas of paddy rice and high percentage of paddy fields among its total farmland. The region is also known for its high-quality rice. The features of the spatial distribution of the new varieties of paddy rice in the Tohoku region after the mid-1990s are recapitulated as follows. (1) At the region level, varieties of paddy rice diversified and regional differentiation appeared. (2) At the prefectural level, planted area of paddy rice decreased and the percentage of the main variety increased. (3) Throughout the region and prefecture levels, the naming of the new varieties of paddy rice was simplified and generalized.

In recent years, the consumers in Japan prefer delicious rice all the more. To correspond with the demands of the current market, production centers of paddy rice began to sell value-added paddy rice by the name of "regional brand-name varieties" from 2000. The brand-name varieties are selected by prefectural offices, farmers' organizations, agricultural cooperatives, and food agency offices, and are registered officially by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. The brand-name varieties had been developed mainly by agricultural experiment centers located in or near the producing centers. Nevertheless, the new varieties which were developed by research centers and private companies located outside the region and those discovered by individual farms have also been registered as brand-name varieties in recent years.

In the process of development and distribution of the new varieties of paddy rice, some conditions are considered as the commodification of paddy rice production. (i) New varieties of paddy rice with good taste and flavor were constantly bred and spread corresponding with recent market demands. (ii) Some of the new varieties were added more values by being designated as regional brand-name varieties. (iii) Main varieties were introduced by individual farms simultaneously according to the marketing strategies of prefectural and municipal administrations and agricultural cooperatives. The reasons why the new varieties did not diversify at farm management level can be ascribed not only to the marketing strategies by the regional organizations but also to the aging of farmers and low market prices.

As proposals for the future, it is necessary that the producing centers cooperate with the small and medium size enterprises that have exclusive technology to produce new varieties. The agricultural subsidies to cope with the aging of farmers and increased idle farmland will also be needed. Many individual farms and small companies such as rice retailers should participate in the distribution

sectors, and practice cost-cutting production methods.

Keywords: commodification, food supply, paddy rice, variety, Tohoku region