Consumer Co-operatives and Perceptions of Food Safety: Shaping Markets in Post-Fukushima Japan

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines consumer co-operatives and members’ perceptions of food safety. Japan is an ideal place to study given it is undoubtedly the ‘best example of a successful consumer co-operative sector in the postwar period’ (Birchall, 2002, p. 79). While some co-operatives have evolved into a considerable political force, not all consumer co-operatives are as large or as politically active. This study qualitatively explores the views of the members of two small, less politically active co-operatives in Tokushima. Of particular relevance are the types of produce being consumed by members, and why (and how) purchasing behaviour has been shaped by food safety concerns, post-Fukushima.

KEYWORDS
Chisan Chishō, Eat Local Movement, Food Education, Food Security, Shoku No Anzen Anshin, Shokuiku

INTRODUCTION
Japan has been described as the ‘land of co-operatives’ (Thompson, 2008). According to the International Cooperative Alliance (2012), the presence of Japanese co-operatives in daily life is unsurpassed by any other country, and their economic impact is substantial. Within Japan’s co-operative sector, 74% are consumer co-operatives, constituting 80.4% of combined annual sales. Japanese consumer co-operatives consist of more than 27 million members, comprising 49% of total households (Kurimoto, 2015) and an annual turnover of US$25 billion1 in 2014 (JCCU 2015). Specialist in socio-economics and the global co-operative movement, Johnston Birchall (2002, p. 72) thus claims, ‘The Japanese co-operative movement is, on several criteria, the most successful in the world.’ The significance of Japan’s consumer co-operatives also extends beyond the domestic market. They are significant to global suppliers because, as overall third largest retailer (Thompson, 2008), they are both a competitive force in the Japanese retail food sector and a distribution network for imported products. As such they have demonstrated strength in preventing importation of foods that did not meet specified standards (even though compliant with World Health Organisation standards) (Jussaume, 1991, p. 33).

While Japanese co-operatives boomed in conjunction with Japan’s economic success in the 1980s, the proceeding economic downturn, misnamed Japan’s ‘lost decade’ according to Metzler (2012), prompted predictions of decline (Jussaume, 1991; Ashkenazi and Jacob, 2000; Jussaume, Hisano, and Taniguchi, 2000; Parker, 2005). Yet these predictions have not been realised. Membership has expanded and revenue has continued to increase, albeit at modest rates of approximately two to three per cent per year. A major reason for the continued growth in Japanese consumer co-operatives is concern for food safety and security. Numerous food risks resulting from early industrialisation, imported foods,
and domestic scandals or disasters (most recently the Fukushima nuclear reactor disaster in 2011), have reinforced perceptions of a ‘Precarious Japan’, the title of Japan scholar, Ann Allison’s most recent book (2013). These factors have drawn attention to the problems of food safety and security. Consumers have become acutely aware of the fact that ‘Japan is the world’s largest importer of food and approximately 60% of Japanese calorie intake comes from imported food’ (Tanaka, 2008, p. 574).

The strength and uniqueness of Japanese consumer co-operatives has resulted in an emerging body of literature, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the motivations and views of members, despite the fact that they own these businesses (highlighted in Birchall, 2011) title and preferred term of ‘Member-Owned Business’ rather than ‘co-operative’). Much of the existing literature also focuses on a select few very large, politically active co-operatives, which have been treated as exemplars. The purpose of this study is to explore these gaps to garner implications for food marketers. We examine the perceptions and purchasing practices of consumer co-operative members located in a small regional city, with particular attention to meanings of food safety following the Fukushima nuclear accident.

The first section of the paper provides a focused literature review on Japanese co-operatives, food safety, and concepts and policies informing the localisation of food consumption in Japan. This is followed by an outline of the research methodology then a presentation of qualitative findings and implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Rise of Japanese Consumer Co-operatives

The history of Japanese co-operatives is now well documented (Jussaume, Hisano, & Taniguchi, 2000; Saito, 2010; Vacek, 2011) so only a few salient points will be outlined to provide background context for our analysis of contemporary issues. Japan’s first consumer co-operative was formed in 1879, inspired by Great Britain’s Rochdale Equitable Pioneer Society (Rochdale Cooperative) established in 1844. However, in unique contrast to European co-operatives (which were largely driven by the demands of civil society), Japan’s early co-operatives were founded within the elite and middle classes (Saito 2010; Vacek, 2011).

Japan’s post-war co-operatives began to reflect a stronger civil society, formed in response to food safety concerns and pollution scandals accompanying Japan’s rapid industrialisation and urbanisation from the early 1950s. With increasing affluence and an industrial relations structure privileging white-collar male workers, emerged a new urban phenomenon: full-time or ‘professional housewives’ (Vogel, 1978). There is widespread recognition that it was this group of women who formed the backbone of consumer co-operatives from the 1960s. There is now a small body of feminist scholarship on Japanese co-operatives, but most of the literature focuses on the Seikatsu (Lifestyle) Club Consumer Co-operative (SCCC), a uniquely political, urban-based consumer co-operative with its headquarters in Tōkyō (Gelb and Estevez-Abe, 1998; Lam, 1999; LeBlanc, 1999; Grubel, 2004; Jo, 2011; Kimura, 2013). However, little is known about regional consumer co-operatives and those less politically engaged. This study therefore aims to explore the consumer activities and motivations underlying membership in two co-operatives in regional Japan.

Co-operatives range from large multi-function prefectural organisations, with shops the size of large department stores, to han: small but very significant groups of four to seven households, who place a weekly collective order to be delivered to a local co-operative distribution centre or house. The han joint-buying strategy is unique among global co-operatives (Birchall 2002), providing the basis for the emergence, growth and business success of Japanese co-operatives. The chief purpose of joint-buying is to achieve economies of scale, lowering costs and maximising freshness of produce. While this is attractive to consumers and thus an ‘effective marketing strategy’ (Jussaume, 1991, p. 30) for the co-operatives, the reduced storage requirement and delivery cost is a major economic advantage.

While cost is important, the popularity and clean image of the han system is also due to its focus on sanchoku: the delivery of primarily fresh eggs, milk, vegetables and fruit purchased directly from farmers. Through sanchoku emerged a discourse associating proximity with food safety.
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