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# From hoes to story-telling as “Weapons of the Weak”: farmers’ resistance to neoliberal 2007 Multi-Product Management Stabilization Plan in Japan

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## Abstract

While neoliberalism has promoted free trade, market rule, and productivist agriculture in the food production system, farmers and their unions in developed countries partially managed to shun the forces of neoliberalism. What are the underpinning strength and factors of such resilience? Discussions have concentrated at national policy and organizational level and tacit resistance at community and farm levels remain unexplored, inter alia from their historical embeddedness perspective. This study explores the way Japanese farmers frame their contemporary political situation with neoliberalism of the late 2000s with a grounded approach of face-to-face interview at a community level. The farmers resist it mobilizing Scott’s anthropological notion of “Weapons of the Weak” through story-telling instead of hoes in ancient time (Scott JC, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, 1985). In concrete, the farmers resisted a neoliberal policy of *Hinmoku Ōdanteki Keiei Antei Taisaku*, or the Multi-Product Management Stabilization Plan (MPP), in the early 2000s, which promoted larger scale farming to pursue the efficiency of scale merits. The policy was first introduced in 2005 as a concept and dominated the agricultural policy scenes from 2007 to 2009, and then its influence disappeared toward 2010. The rise and fall of the concept and policy provide us with rare opportunity to examine the historical embeddedness of the farmers and their resistance to such neoliberal globalization. We conducted interviews with the leaders of cooperative farms and stakeholders in Daisen City, Akita Prefecture, Japan; the study found that farmers’ framing of neoliberalism was ambivalent causing partial adoption and resistance. The leaders of the cooperative farms could form the cooperative farms but thought further development difficult because members intended to keep their farming independent. Close frame and discourse analysis revealed that farmers in Japan could express their frustration on neoliberal discourse and policy through multiple tactics of “Weapons of the Weak” by complaining to the leaders, miscalculating the figures, or claiming family-based food sovereignty that “we produce what goes into our family mouths.” Such tactics procrastinated the process and eventually stopped the policy. The incident demonstrates how farmers in the network can slow the progress of neoliberal discourse and policy implementation. From the analysis, the notion of “Weapons of the Weak” can be applied as a part of the combination with farmers’ historical embeddedness, symbolism of foods, framing, and electoral resistance.

**Keywords:** Neoliberalism, Ambivalent framing, Weapons of the Weak, Historical embeddedness, Symbolism of foods, Agriculture, Rice, Cooperative farms, Japan

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## Introduction

Rice is one of the most traditional staple dishes in the Japanese society in the East Asia region. In Japanese rural communities, agriculture has played fundamental roles in the environment, society, and economy, let alone rice in the northeast part of Honshu, the Tohoku region [1, 2]. Historically, producing rice was embedded in a rural community in an extensive way to mobilize an entire village in farming seasons in the area (Fig. 1). Furthermore, a rice production region has historically added ingeniousness to rice dishes; for example, Akita Prefecture is known for *kiritanpo*, half-pounded *mochi* stretched on a wood bar (Fig. 2). People put it in a pot with chicken and vegetables (Fig. 3). Traditional and ethnic foods are used as symbols of community [3–5]. After WWII, while rice remains vital in Japanese cuisine, rice production became individual or family work separated from a community-based unit due to agricultural modernization and subsidies targeting rice production [6]. However, owing to globalization of the agri-food system, the Japanese government pursues more economic efficiency in farming, and this challenges how farmers understand their farming, decide farming practice, and mobilize their agricultural communities.

In the 2000s, in response to negotiations in the World Trade Organization, the Japanese government started the transition toward a more open global agricultural market: so-called neoliberalism approach. One of the policies adapting to it was the Multi-Product Management Stabilization Plan (MPP). It was a de-coupling policy that provided subsidies for individual farmers and cooperative farms under a certain size, influenced by the policies in the EU. Although the project and its promotion initially attracted enough applicants and added cooperative farms for rice production, it frustrated the farmers and ultimately halted.

In the Middle Age in Japan, farmers' revolts were not rare. The farmers made a village-based decision to



**Fig. 1** Rice planting by hand in Daisen City, Akita Prefecture, Japan circa 1953. Source: Daisen City Archive



**Fig. 2** Kiritanpo making. Source: The Collection of the Picture Materials of Tourism in Akita Prefecture for Download. [Akitafan.com](https://www.akitafan.com), Akita City, Japan. n.d. <https://www.akitafan.com/pages/photodl>. Accessed 18 Dec 2019

oppose burdening annual tribute or flee [7]. From the late 17th century to the 18th century, if lords could not handle farmers' acute appeal and demand for the help on tribute, tax, and other injustice, the farmers united at a village level and got involved in the revolt. In the process, they destroyed the houses of dirty merchants such as loan sharks and rice wholesalers. According to Wakao (2018), farmers carried farm tools such as hoes to symbolize their resistance ([7], Fig. 4). These tools served as symbolic weapons, and actual cases to kill and hurt were rather few [7]. From the middle of the 17th century, feudal domains started to ban this type of revolts. However, these revolts became very large in the late 18th century. The resistance in the Middle Age is termed "*Ikki*" (or 一揆) associated with the hoes, and people nowadays commonly refer to *Ikki* to symbolize general resistance. The style of the revolts changed to *uchikowashi* in the 19th century [7]. Instead of having



**Fig. 3** Kiritanpo pot. Source: The Collection of the Picture Materials of Tourism in Akita Prefecture for Download. [Akitafan.com](https://www.akitafan.com), Akita City, Japan. n.d. <https://www.akitafan.com/pages/photodl>. Accessed 18 Dec 2019



**Fig. 4** Farmers' revolt. Reproduced from Yamada S. Farmers' revolt [Modern illustration]. The Town of Ine, Ine, Kyoto. In: Compilation Committee for Record of Ine Town, editor, Record of Ine Town. First Volume. Tokyo: Gyōsei; 1984. p. 440. [in Japanese]

farmers united in a village, only poor farmers came out to destroy the houses of dirty oppressive merchants. A very large revolt of this type emerged around current Tokyo in 1866. The farmers then were divided: ones to revolt and the others to defend their villages against the revolt.

The tradition of the revolts continued after the Meiji Restoration in 1868; for example, farmers in Takasaki strongly demanded the decrease of annual tribute and

resorted to the revolt [7]. In the 1910s, a large national revolt to mention happened though women began it in Toyama City [8]. The industrialization in the 1910s caused the severe rice shortage and the rice price speculation. This caused the plead to rice merchants, and then emerged a national riot involving industrial workers. This resulted in the government's strong intervention in the rice market from the 1930s to the 1990s [9].

After WWII, the acreage reduction from the 1970s and rice price decrease with trade liberalization from the 1990s concerned farmers and caused resistance [9]. The acreage reduction and the reduction of rice sale frustrated farmers. Many farmers defied this regulation and executed everyday forms of resistance by selling rice out of the government distribution channels, so-called dark rice [9, 10]. This study furthers the studies of resistance focusing on Japanese farmers' ways and limitation on framing, adopting, and resisting contemporary globalization of the agri-food system, especially the agricultural policies to promote the globalization and neoliberalism in the 2000s.

This study interviewed about the process by the leaders of cooperative farms in Daisen City, Akita Prefecture, in 2009 in order to understand how farmers involved in the notion "Weapons of the Weak" on the ground could frame, adopt, and resist neoliberal agricultural policy through measures in Japan (Fig. 5). This



**Fig. 5** Daisen City, Japan. Source: Natural Earth. 2013. <https://www.naturalearthdata.com/>. Accessed 18 Dec 2019

provides us with a unique opportunity to examine our understanding of farmers' resilience and resistance in this globalizing age.

While this section would continue to discuss the development of neoliberalism in the agri-food system and farmers' possible reaction, the next section would explain the main method of this study, the interviews with the farmers. The third section would demonstrate farmers' reaction and resistance to the MPP. Then, this study would analyze their components and combination. The farmers' combination of frame and resistance was attributed to historical embeddedness of rural communities. It was enough to slow and eventually halt the progress of neoliberalism policy in the Japanese farming sector.

### **"Weapons of the Weak" and framing to resist neoliberal policy**

In terms of the agri-food system, neoliberalism serves global food security and productivist interests, and it drives agricultural geography and policies toward the corporate food regime, fulfilling the profit interest of global agribusinesses [11, 12]. In this study, this social and economic norm of social production was regarded as framing toward neoliberalism. While farmers and stakeholders follow neoliberalism and related policies, alternative and oppositional processes and results against neoliberalism, a "double movement" could emerge ([13], p. 458 [10]) in the form of ground-level resistance to policies. This has elicited several types of resistance from farmers in different regions of the world. In developed countries, farmers' electoral power has enabled them to avoid full exposure to neoliberalism [14]. In developing countries, however, the processes of neoliberalism frequently marginalize farmers and their livelihood [15]. Peasants across Asia and Latin America have attempted to resist this tendency and have faced suppression from states, landowners, and urban businesses [16].

"Weapons of the Weak" can strengthen the understanding of farmers' on-the-ground resistance against neoliberalism and related policies because it clarifies the policy's unpopularity and impossibility through people's anonymous or low-profile resistance on the ground [17]. Scott observed anonymous resistance, "Weapons of the Weak," when agriculture in Malaysia went through the Green Revolution. "Weapons of the Weak" would be expected to show resistance and its relation to a policy even to counter neoliberalism.

Also, framing and a frame could show the link from a phenomenon and discourse, people's linguistic understanding of the phenomenon, to resistance. Framing labels and orders ambiguous phenomena to devise and implement a resistance strategy as well as a practical solution [18, 19]. Once we understand the processes from

a frame to resistance, we could expect people's resistance such as "Weapons of the Weak" and analyze the process from framing to the effect of framing, possibly resilience [17]. Simultaneously, this could involve historical embeddedness and symbolism underlying a phenomenon of framing and resistance.

### **Methods**

The main method of data collection in this study was via interviews with leaders of cooperative farms in Daisen City, local government officials, JA staff, and prefectural Chamber of Agriculture staff (Table 1). Cooperative farms were a useful source of information on how farmers on the ground framed and reacted to neoliberalism, because the MPP targeted small farmers to form cooperative farms to rationalize farm management [20]. Thus, focusing on the cooperative farms was a good strategy to observe the effect on small farmers under the MPP. In 2008, Daisen City was among the municipalities with the largest numbers of participants, and it formed seventy-one cooperative farms [Daisen City Staff, personal communication, December 2, 2008]. This study received approval from the authors' past institution, and the interviewees provided written acknowledgment of informed consent at the time of their interviews.

While the authors interviewed a cooperative farm in a preliminary phase of the study, semistructured interviews were conducted with ninety-eight farmers (from fifty-eight cooperative farms). These interviews took place from July to August 2009 when the authors accompanied City of Daisen officials on a survey of cooperative farms. Interviews with the cooperative farm leaders were guided by the following questions:

- What did community members discuss to form cooperative farms?
- What were past development attempts and instances of government assistance?
- What were the problems in developing a cooperative farm?

**Table 1** Affiliations of the interviewees

MAFF Prefectural Office Staff	2
Prefecture Staff	1
Prefecture Staff at a Regional Level	1
City Staff	5
Prefectural JA Staff	2
Local JA Staff	7
Prefectural Chamber of Agriculture Staff	1
Cooperative Farm Leaders	99 (59 Cooperative Farms)
Total	118

Interviews with government officials and other agents were guided by the following questions:

- What were the roles of each government official or agent?
- How did the MPP change local agriculture, particularly the involvement of local farmers, land use, and crop types?

## Results

### Neoliberal discourse toward the MPP

While the Japanese government started to recognize neoliberalism in the 1980s, the Uruguay Round and the following WTO negotiations added the neoliberal discourse to agricultural policies in Japan. This neoliberal discourse established the policies to prepare for the results of the multilateral trade negotiations with larger and more efficient Japanese agriculture. Mulgan claimed that Japanese policies were less aggressively neoliberal than they could have been because the key political and policy institutions maintained political power [21]. At least, these neoliberal policies affected farmers with lower rice price and the prospect for agricultural decline. In 2005, the Broad Outline for a Management Stabilization Plan decided the MPP as a de-coupling policy to provide the subsidies for larger designated farms and cooperative farms. In fall 2006, the MPP started to gather the application for the 2007 production. To join the MPP, individual core farmers had to manage at least four hectares in all prefectures except in Hokkaidō, where the requirement was ten hectares [20]. Cooperative farms had to manage more than twenty hectares in all prefectures. Cooperative farms had to maintain joint bookkeeping and receive subsidies and sales revenues in a common bank account. They were also required to have a plan that would be profitable enough to incorporate in 5 years.

Within three years, the MPP ceased to be effective. While it had initially gained a significant number of participants, farmers came to frame it as dismissing small farmers. They became opposed to vote against the long-dominant LDP in the Diet in 2007 and 2009, and this disabled the MPP [22, 23].

### Promotion of the MPP in Daisen City

Policy support at the local level helped the formation of cooperative farms in Daisen City [Local JA Staff, personal communication, September 5, 2008]. The city first set a goal for the number of participants in the MPP [Daisen City Staff, personal communication, December 2, 2008]. They envisioned that 10,000 hectares would be included under the plan, about 50% of the city's farmland. They also aimed to have 1000 designated farmers, twenty corporations, and twenty cooperative farms. For

this purpose, the city established the Daisen City Center to Assist Cooperative Farms and its Incorporation (Daisen City Center) in Spring 2006.

These organizations and government bodies in Daisen City worked closely while they played different roles. They held numerous community meetings to discuss the development of cooperative farms under the MPP [Local JA Staff, personal communication, September 5, 2008]. Local JA staff helped cooperative farms and other applicants complete their applications for the MPP. In addition, the Daisen City Center and the local JA continuously assisted cooperative farms in completing bookkeeping [Staff at Daisen City Center, personal communication, March 6, 2009]. The prefecture's local offices supported further development for incorporation [Local Prefecture Staff, personal communication, October 16, 2008]. In similar ways, the City Center and the prefecture's local office provided a stimulus for diversification [Local Prefecture Staff, personal communication, October 16, 2008; Staff at Daisen City Center, personal communication, March 6, 2009]. Also, the center, along with other agencies, promoted a reduction in the number of farm machines on cooperative farms [Daisen City Staff, personal communication, December 2, 2008].

### Farmers' reactions

Working farmers expressed ambivalence in their framing of neoliberal agricultural policy while they partially followed the MPP and resisted with "Weapons of the Weak" [17]. Their resistance was attributed not only to socio-economic and agricultural elements of the farms but also to historical embeddedness and symbolism of foods. The leaders in the interviews followed the policy and formed and developed cooperative farms, but they believed it difficult to implement attempts at operating profitably. Farmers' reaction to neoliberal discourse and policies was attributed to historical embeddedness of rice-farming communities including the impact of agricultural modernization policies in addition to symbolism of foods. In 2008, Daisen had 1089 individual farmers, thirty-four farm corporations, and seventy-one cooperative farms under the MPP. It had among the largest numbers of participants in Japan, and 48% of its farmland was covered under the plan [Daisen City Staff, personal communication, December 2, 2008]. The average farm size of Daisen's cooperative farms was 26.1 hectares [24].<sup>1</sup> A cooperative farm comprised 15.2 farm households on average. This was certainly much larger than Japan's average farm size, 1.8 hectares [25].

<sup>1</sup>These numbers came from the surveys by Daisen City Center in 2008 and 2009 [24]. These involved sixty-one cooperative farms. The questionnaires included the sizes of all these farms; the sheets for fifty-one cooperative farms had the number of farm households belonging to them.

Farmers in community meetings could discuss the elements of incorporation and subsidies and decide the ways to follow the MPP and conduct cooperative farm development. Some community meetings on the plan were idealistic while others were realistic [Local JA Staff, personal communication, September 18, 2008]. They also discussed topics related to cooperative farms:

I can only say this. I think it is good that people form an organization and start to talk about various topics... This time, I feel regret [for the past efforts to guide the community]. The topics include machines and what crops to introduce to increase profit. While an organization cannot carry them out right away, the people talk a lot about them. [Local JA Staff, personal communication, September 18, 2008]

The scale of the formation of cooperative farms in Daisen was attributed to assistance from various stakeholders, including local JA [Local JA Staff, personal communication, September 5, 2008]. In addition, past cooperative attempts and the impact of old and concurrent policies increased the number of cooperative farms. Past cooperative farm work at various times existed in thirty-six communities of the interviewed leaders. While they did cooperative farm work, they would do such activities as food preparation and extra-cash earning. A cooperative farm leader explained, "We used to make slippers together. Also, we did small-scale poultry raising and bought fish in a collective way. We cooked and ate together during a busy farming season" [personal communication, July 9, 2009]. In the last six decades, farmers would collectively adopt policies for agricultural modernization. Land improvement projects aided the formation of cooperative farms in nine communities. Another popular method of cooperation was sharing machines, including those for soybean production. Soybeans were one of the crops designated in the set-aside policy.

While forming the MPP, the leaders of the cooperative farms needed to arrange agricultural and economic need of each member household and their communities. The leaders were ordinarily engaged in various delicate tasks, from leading discussions and managing farms to paperwork and bookkeeping. The leaders had to gather the payment and redistribute the income:

Each household has a different economy. The payment time to the insurance association was different by premium. To gather everyone for cooperation is not easy. The leaders feel pressured and tired. The leaders are called many times. We have not had a successor. The job is not attractive, and successors decreased, but the governments do not train a leader [Cooperative Farm Leader, personal communication, August 10, 2009].

In this way, leadership also became an issue. They were under pressure and worried about the organizations' sustainability.

While cooperative farmers in Daisen City increased under the MPP, many farmers shunned cooperative farms, regardless of the size of their own farm. They wanted to keep their independent farm economy and rice farming for home consumption. Symbolism of foods embedded in rice production and consumption at rural households and communities illustrated family-based food sovereignty and justified this resistance. A cooperative leader mentioned that the members discussed "we produce what goes into our family mouths" in the meetings [Cooperative Farm Leader, personal communication, August 9, 2009]. This symbolism assisted farmers' resistance in cooperative farm development. At the time a community formed a cooperative farm, both small and large rice farms could prefer to be independent. While these small farmers could not receive the MPP's subsidies, they preferred to work until circumstances, such as age or the breakdown of their equipment, prevented them from farming any longer.

Many leaders, after considering the incentives and social structures of their communities, framed incorporation as difficult though planning it was the requirement of the MPP. The leaders of twenty cooperative farms described incorporation this way. Once incorporated, cooperative farms had to be profitable enough at least to pay the cost of registration fees and corporate taxes. Farmers evaluated strategies for a higher level of profitability, such as machine rationalization and diversified agriculture [26], and in response to this, local JA and governments promoted subsidies for machine purchases and assisted with diversification. To hesitate about the machine renewal, one cooperative farm leader [personal communication, July 28, 2009] complained about the policy support, "Machines get old, but we could not buy new ones. The policies' terms are bad." Thus, from the perception of the cooperative farm leaders, incorporation was regarded as difficult.

While the MPP required cooperative farms to consolidate the managements of member farms, this guidance was difficult enough that most cooperative farms sabotaged it without open discussion: low-profile resistance of "Weapons of the Weak" [17]. The cooperative farms recognized members' desire to keep individual rice production on their land with their machinery. On the other hand, the MPP obliged the cooperative farms to use a common bank account while the MPP's requirements temporarily allowed individual rice production. To get around this problem, most cooperative farms and member farmers chose the Edaban type ([27], Local Prefecture Staff, personal communication, October 16, 2008). In the Edaban type, member farmers kept track of their

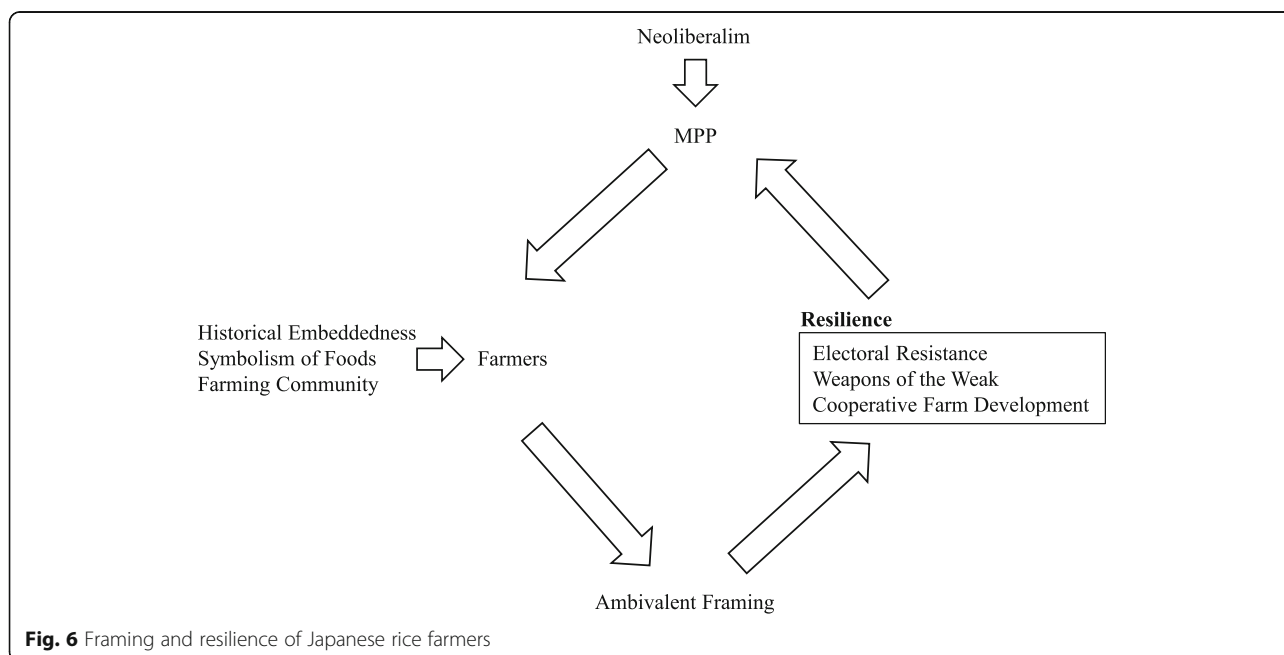
own rice production. This allowed cooperative farms to redistribute the pooled income by the production. Because the plan required cooperative farms to have 5-year plans for consolidation and incorporation, farmers used a common bank account but avoided the immediate consolidation of labor and land use.

**Discussion**

This study first reviewed the history of revolts and resistances. We then explored farmers’ framing, story-telling, and practice to explore resilience under neoliberal discourse and policy in Japan (Fig. 6). The case study showed the farmers’ ambivalent framing and resistance well: they partially followed the discourse and policy while they resisted them through electoral voting and low-profile “Weapons of the Weak” [17, 23]. The combination of these types of framing and resistance disabled neoliberal policy in Japan and slowed the progress of neoliberalism in the farm sector. The cooperative farms developed to the extent the leaders and members thought further development difficult. While the adoption of the Edaban type was an example of “Weapons of the Weak,” a leader could casually complain about the implementation of the policies such as the ones for machine renewal [personal communication, July 28, 2009]. Furthermore, nationally, farmers’ electoral power was strong enough to end the role of the MPP as a major agricultural policy [23]. Thus, while farmers’ ambivalent framing and Weapons of the Weak slowed the implementation of neoliberal policy, their electoral power stopped the policy [17].

While this study briefly discussed the spread and implementation of neoliberal discourse and policy from global to local scales, the farmers in this study implied the factors for their framing and resistance to face neoliberal discourse and policy. First, historical embeddedness of farming communities resulted from both collective and individual experience of farming and rural lives and affected farmers’ reaction on the MPP. Collective experience could facilitate the policy mobilization of the community and result in cooperative farms under the MPP. The cooperative farms developed to the extent that the communities were able. Concurrently, individual rice farming developed after WWII and rice’s symbolism for family-based food sovereignty seemed to resist and prevent the development of the cooperative farm. Thus, these historical and symbolic elements contributed to the framing, resistance, and resilience of the farmers facing neoliberalism.

We also saw limitations of such strategies the effects may well be limited in time and space. Further research is required to gain a better understanding of what change neoliberal discourse and policy would cause on framing, resistance, and resilience of the farmers. The Japanese government continues to pursue economic growth through free trade. Without no serious farmer resistance observed in the last few years, Japan agreed to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for the Trans-Pacific Partnership with ten countries in the Asia-Pacific region in 2018 [28]. Also, the Japanese government pursued new bilateral trade negotiations with the US in 2019. While we are not able to observe the dramatic political change to capture the politics about



**Fig. 6** Framing and resilience of Japanese rice farmers

farmers and rice-farming communities nowadays, we can again study historical change of physical, social, and cultural factors of the communities and understand what type of resilience can involve farmers to prepare for the contemporary global challenges in the agri-food sector.

## Conclusion

This study first reviewed the rich history of revolts and resistances of farmers symbolized with hoes or the term *Ikki*. We then explored farmers' framing and storytelling to explore resilience under neoliberal discourse and policy in Japan (Fig. 6). Their stories and practices served as contemporary hoes, or "Weapons of the Weak". By doing so, this study showed Japanese farmers' ambivalent framing and consequential resistance and resilience on neoliberal agricultural policies. While integrated with historical embeddedness and symbolism of foods, resistance of the farmers was electoral as well as low-profile "Weapons of the Weak" [17]. To track the abandonment of the policy, the study seemed to show the possibility of Japanese farmers' resistant almost to the full extent. Reflecting historical embeddedness and symbolism of food, farmers express ambivalent framing to follow the policies in a half way while it caused the resistance to disable them. That is to say, in the case of Japan, the combination of these factors could be enough to threaten the continuation of the neoliberal policies.

Again, this study demands further studies about the combination of farmers' framing and resistance. The effectiveness of resistance in this study would be in question as Japanese rural communities decrease its population along with further trade negotiations [29]. In particular, environmental aspects of agriculture either as negative drivers or as public goods are highlighted both in urban as well as rural areas in recent years. Future studies would observe how these types of social change would affect both farmers' electoral and "Weapons of the Weak" resistance [17]. Thus, the research on the combination of farmers' framing and resistance with farmers' stories will continue to inform us of resilience and resistance of farmers and other stakeholders against neoliberalism and different negative impact on rural communities.

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## Authors' contributions

Yoshitaka Miyake conducted the research. Yoshitaka Miyake and Ryo Kohsaka coauthored the manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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## Availability of data and materials

The interview data for this study are not available. The research received the approval for involving human subjects, and this demands the research to discard the interview data upon the completion of the research. On the other hand, the documental and statistical data are available upon request.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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