

Agricultural Human Resource Policies in the Age of Agricultural Labor Shortage: A Comparative Analysis on South Korea and Japan

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Abstract

This study asks why the local governmental actors in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) have revised its policies to secure agricultural workforces faster than those in Japan focusing on the measures for agricultural extension and training. Korea and Japan share not only the feature of agricultural structure but also the shortage of agricultural workforces due to the aging and population decrease. While Japan has revised its approaches to secure agricultural workforces gradually, Korea has done rapidly and actively. The author's literature review and interview of local government officers in the two countries indicate that the features of developmental state such as autonomous status by governmental actors in Korea contribute to the rapid and active revision. While the governmental sector in Korea holds autonomy from private actors, that in Japan tends to collaborate with private actors such as agricultural cooperatives. Differently from the age of developmental state in the 20th Century, however, the policy making in Korea has been decentralized recently.

Keywords: agriculture human resources, agricultural extension services, local government, Korea, Japan

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Introduction

This study asks why the governmental actors in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) have revised its policies to secure agricultural workforces faster than those in Japan focusing on the measures for agricultural extension and training. The shortage of agricultural human resources has been one of the serious public policy subjects in the two East Asian countries for decades because of rural-to-urban migration, aging of incumbent farmers, and the shrinking of rural population. While Korea and Japan share the common policy subjects, however, the two countries' governmental sectors have shown different approaches to the subject. In other words, Korea has launched various programs to secure agricultural workforces faster than Japan since the 2010s. This study seeks the reason why the Korea's central and local governments have been able to launch the measures to secure human resources in agriculture by employing the research methods of literature review and interview.

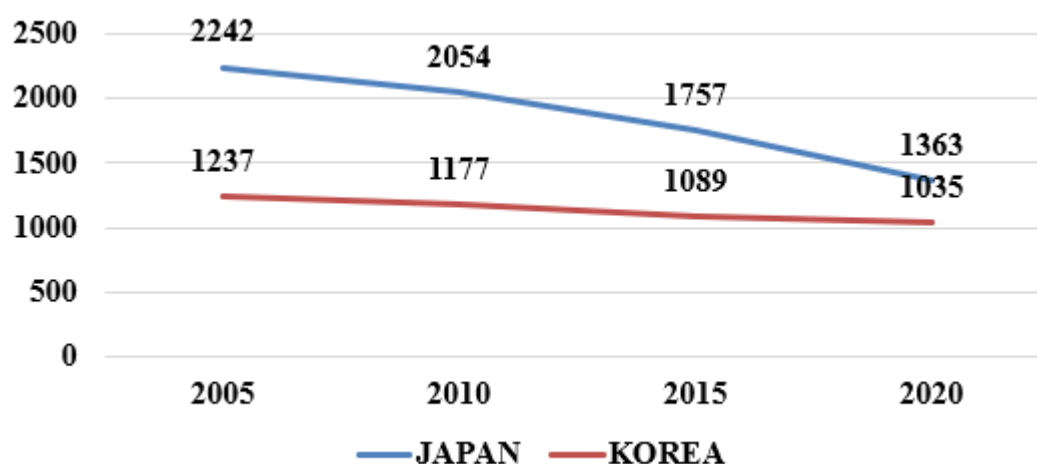
Background of Study

In both Korea and Japan, the share of rural population has been decreased since the 1960s due to the rapid industrialization known as “the East Asian miracle” (World Bank, 1993). The outflow of workforces from the agricultural sector in the two countries has been covered by mechanization and some measures to attract the youth to farm sector (Ma & Nam, 2015; Yoo & Hwang, 2018). Since the 2010s, both the Korean and Japanese governments have promoted internal urban-to-rural migration to secure agricultural workforces (Nawakura, 2024).

As Figure 1 shows, however, the number of full-time farmers in the two countries has been decreased for the last two decades in spite of the governmental measures. This is, at least partly, because of the aging and retirement of incumbent farmers (The Associated Press, 2024). As of the mid-2020s, average age of the Japanese and Korean farmers is 68 years old and more than half of them have no successors to cultivate their farmlands. While the aged farmers retire, the urban-to-rural migration cannot cover the shortage of agricultural workforces because of their limited skills to operate their farmlands.

Figure 1

Number of Farmers in Korea and Japan (Unit: thousand)



Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (2025a) and Korean Statistical Information Service (2025a)

On the other hand, agriculture in Korea and Japan requires many workforces structurally compared with that in North America, Australia, and West Europe. Because of the mountainous landscape, the farmlands in Korea and Japan are highly fragmented except for some exceptional cases such as Hokkaido in Japan.¹ Under the geographical condition of much natural disaster such as typhoon and flood, in addition, agricultural works and facilities in Korea and Japan have played the role of flood control and reduced the damage caused by the natural disasters.² Because of those reasons, it is one of the primary policy subjects for the governments of Korea and Japan to secure the number of agricultural workforces.

Facing the similar difficulty as seen above, however, the governmental sectors in Korea and Japan show differences each other in responding to the task. The central and local governments in Japan have shown gradual change in the policies to secure agricultural workforces. In terms of the curriculum of agricultural colleges (*Nogyo Daigakko*, prefectural institutions of agricultural extension services), for example, the change of agricultural extension curriculum to grow young agricultural entrepreneurs has been proceeded gradually taking several years.³ In Korea, on the other hand, the curriculum of the Provincial Agricultural Extension Services (*Nong-eop Gisulwon*) has been reformed rapidly and frequently responding to the structural changes of agricultural industry. For example, the support programs for small-sized professional farmers (*gangso-nong*) was decreased within a few years in the latter half of the 2010s while the central government began to promote the enlargement of farmland size per household to increase the competitiveness of individual Korean farmers in the free trade era⁴ (Nawakura, 2025).

The difference between the two countries is clear also in terms of employing foreign workers in the agricultural sector. As Figure 2 indicates, Korea rapidly increased its number of foreign agricultural workers from 2021 (1,841) to 2022 (12,806). This is not only due to the COVID-19 pandemic but also to the launching of a seasonal visa program for foreign workers in the agricultural sector. The Korea's seasonal visa program enables mayors in individual municipalities to exchange Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) directly with the leaders of rural municipalities in developing countries bypassing the central government⁵ while Japan accepts foreign agricultural workers based on annual visa programs guided by the central government.

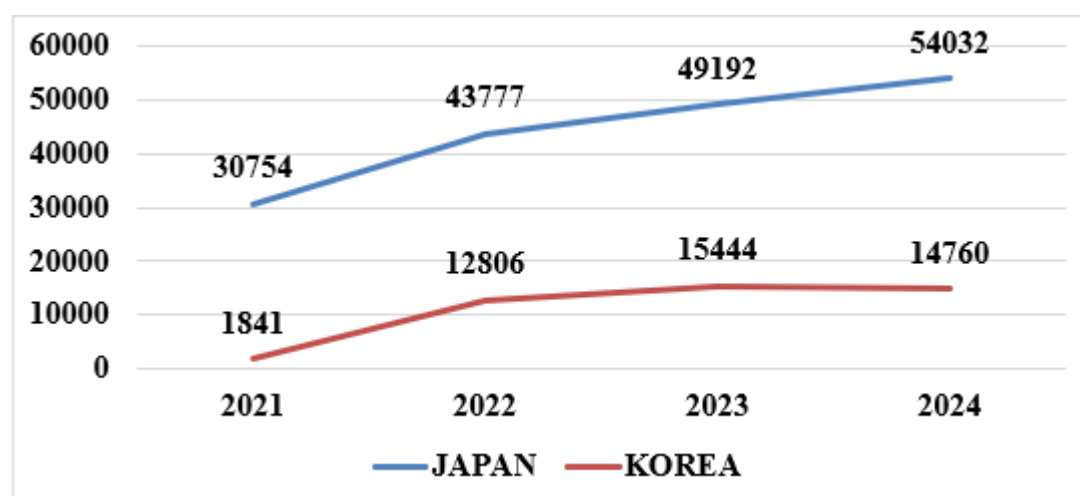
¹ For detail, see Nawakura (2019).

² For example, see INAS (n.d.)

³ The analysis by Magaki & Yoshida (2020) indicates that, though most agricultural colleges in Japan acknowledge the necessity to support young agricultural entrepreneurs, the curriculum of most colleges still emphasize to train the children of incumbent farmers as their parents' successors.

⁴ Since the early 2000s, Korea has concluded free trade agreements with major economies around the world such as the United States and the European Union.

⁵ For example, Ravindran (2025).

Figure 2*Number of Foreign Agricultural Workers in Korea and Japan⁶*

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (2025b) and Korean Statistical Information Service, (2025b)

This study seeks the reason why the Korean authorities have been more active to reform its agricultural structure more rapidly than Japan. For setting the framework of the analysis, the next section reviews previous studies and shows hypothesis.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

As Nawakura (2019) points out, Korea is one of the rare countries to achieve the rapid transition from low-income countries to high-income ones without serious income gap between urban and rural sectors. Though the income per farming household in the 1980s stagnated to 70-80% of that of urban dwellers temporarily, the nation has succeeded in raising the income not only of urban workers but also of agricultural ones for decades. In the processes of the parallel development of urban and rural sectors, as Jeong (2023) and Burmeister (1990) point out, the government played active roles in promoting agricultural productivity such as planning seed production and effective retailing of agricultural products. In the previous works of developmental state, such active and autonomous status of the Korean state was described as “embedded autonomy” as Evans (1995) argues.

On the other hand, the Japanese agricultural development can be featured with the coordination among the central government, local authorities (both prefectural and municipal), agricultural cooperatives, and individual farmers. Yoshida (2012) and Iida (2017) describes that the agricultural policies by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party have been determined as a result of the negotiation and coordination among the Party, executive branch of the government, and some private actors such as agricultural cooperatives. Though Japan has been known as one of the developmental states to achieve rapid economic growth under the leadership of the state sector (Johnson, 1983), its agricultural policies have been determined as a result of the coordination by public and private actors rather than the direction by the state.

⁶ Note that the Korean data includes foreign agricultural workers under both annual and seasonal permission while the Japanese one include only those under annual permission.

The previous studies reviewed above show that Korea and Japan have differences in terms of the scope to apply the developmental state model. While Korea has applied its developmental state model not only on urban industry but also on agricultural sector, Japan has employed different style of the state's intervention between urban industry and agriculture.⁷ This suggests the possibility that the Korea's developmental state approaches, particularly the embedded autonomy, have contributed to the faster changes in agricultural human resource policies than Japan.

On the other hand, however, both the governments of Korea and Japan have promoted decentralization and the vitalization of local governments in agricultural politics. As Hwang (2019) points out, a series of decentralization in the 2010s has transferred various subsidy programs and legal rights from the central government to the local ones in agricultural policies. Also in Japan, the central government has promoted local governments to vitalize the nation's rural industry since the mid-2010s in the name of *Chiho-sosei* (regional revitalization).⁸ This means that, differently from the age of the developmental state in the latter half of the 20th Century, the central governments of Korea and Japan today launch and execute their rural policies with collaboration with local governments.

Reviewing existing studies above, this study sets a hypothesis that local governments in Korea has launched the policies to secure agricultural workforces more rapidly than those in Japan based on the methods of developmental state such as autonomous decision making by governmental sector and the commanding status of the governments on private actors. In addition, this study also sets the hypothesis that the developmental state approaches are sustained even in the age of decentralization. The two sections below analyze the local governments' actions to secure agricultural workforces in the age of population shrinking.

Japan: Coordination With Private Sector

Since the early phase of the industrialization in the 1960s, the number of farmers in Japan has been decreased nationwide. In order to secure the workforces in agricultural sector, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) has launched various programs to support the Japanese youth to work in agricultural sector (Hirowatari, 2008). In the prefectural level, agricultural colleges located in 43 out of 47 prefectures nationwide have acted as major institutions to train the youth to professional farmers.

On the other hand, the Japanese local governments have launched some policies to invite urban workers and/or employees in enterprise-operated farms to operate their local farmlands. As a major option to train those domestic immigrants, the Community-Reactivating Cooperator Squad Program (*Chiiki-okoshi Kyoryokutai*, CRCS) operated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication (MIC). The CRCS is the program to enable local governments to employ young and talented domestic immigrants as officers in the local governments with the term of three years (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, n.d.). The wage for the CRCS members is wholly covered by the central government's subsidy. According to the statistics by the MIC, at least 403

⁷ Note that Johnson (1983) applied his argument of developmental state mainly on industrialization policies by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and made limited mention to agricultural policies by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries.

⁸ For example, see Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (2024).

people out of the 4,463 CRCS veterans became professional farm operators in rural municipalities (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication, 2024).

While the CRCS Program contributes to secure urban youngsters to work in agricultural sector, however, it is another problem to grow them as professional farmers. Related to this policy subject, the author implemented interview on municipal officers and incumbent farmers in Hokkaido Prefecture and Akita Prefecture in northern Japan in autumn, 2024.

Nayoro City, a rural municipality located in northern Hokkaido, has secured the successors of their rice production by the CRCS Program. In 2021, the Nayoro municipal government nominated Mr. Ryo Nishikawa, a domestic immigrant from Shizuoka Prefecture of Central Japan, as a CRCS member to secure a young worker in its agricultural sector. Mr. Nishikawa worked as an employee of enterprise-operated farms in his previous residence in Shizuoka for three years. Because the agricultural operator requires different skills from employed agricultural workers, he needed to learn how to operate agriculture as an autonomous farm operator. Mr. Nishikawa said “The previous operator of my farmland in Nayoro played the role as a trainer of farm operation” (R. Nishikawa, personal communication, October 29, 2024).

While Mr. Nishikawa emphasized that the previous operator taught rich information and know-how of farm operation, the personal training had limits to learn whole of agricultural work in cold region in northern Japan because the previous operator was highly aged when Mr. Nishikawa began to farm in Nayoro. To follow it, the Nayoro municipal government employed a coordinator to assist the young farmers to brush up their skills of farm operation. Japan Agriculture Dohoku Nayoro, an agricultural cooperative in Nayoro City, recommended Mr. Tadao Ohta, a former agricultural cooperative manager, as a candidate for the coordinator to the municipal government. The municipal government followed the recommendation by the agricultural cooperative. Mr. Ohta has acted as a coordinator for newly migrated farmers to Nayoro for several years (T. Ohta & H. Sengoku, personal communication, October 29, 2024).

Mr. Hiroshi Sengoku, a chief officer of Agricultural Bureau, Nayoro municipal government noted “We do not rely on the agricultural cooperative to secure human resources for the coordinator. We the municipal government autonomously select Mr. Ohta as an agricultural coordinator in our city” (H. Sengoku, personal communication, October 29, 2024). On the other hand, however, both Mr. Sengoku and Mr. Ohta recognized that the partnership between the municipal government and the agricultural cooperative was “an important resource to secure young and skilled human resources in our city’s agriculture” (T. Ohta & H. Sengoku, October 29, 2024). Because the municipal government itself does not have its own organization and human resources for agricultural training, the partnership with agricultural cooperative can be *de facto* only major option to secure agricultural coordinators or trainers locally. This indicates that agriculture cooperatives can play major role in implementing local governments’ policies to secure agricultural workforces.

While the local agricultural cooperative plays major role in supplying agricultural coordinators or trainers to the municipal government in some regions such as Nayoro City, private enterprises can also play an important role in securing agricultural

workforces in other regions. Kita-Akita City located in northern Akita Prefecture is an example for it.

Japanese parsley (*seri*) has been one of the major agricultural products in Kita-Akita City. Because of aging of incumbent farmers and the shortage of their successors, however, the number of Japanese parsley farmers in the municipality has been decreased for decades. As a tool to secure successors, Mr. Hiroyuki Chiba, a chief officer of Industry Bureau, Kita-Akita municipal government, contacted *Kokohore* Japan,⁹ a social enterprise to support M&A in rural areas. “In the process of surveying the current status of our city’s industry,” Mr. Chiba said “the municipal government acknowledged the necessity to invite youngsters from other regions to secure the sustainability of our city’s industry including agriculture (H. Chiba, personal communication, November 12, 2024). For that purpose, it was a reasonable option to contract with *Kokohore* Japan.” *Kokohore* Japan uploaded some advertisements to call for a successor of parsley farms on the Internet and found a young candidate for the parsley farming in Kita-Akita City. The candidate, according to Mr. Katsutoshi Asai, the president of *Kokohore* Japan, has been under training supervised by the incumbent parsley farmer since 2023 (K. Asai &, personal communication, November 12, 2024).

The Japanese cases above indicate that the local governments in Japan prefer a policy approach to build coordination with private actors such as agricultural cooperatives and social enterprises in securing agricultural workforces in the age of aging and population shrinking. This policy approach needs several years from the beginning of the coordination to the official launching of policy. Mr. Chiba of Kita-Akita City said “I and Mr. Asai began to consult each other in 2020. The municipal government and *Kokohore* Japan officially built the framework to secure local workforces in 2022.” Also Mr. Sengoku of Nayoro City said “The municipal government began to seek a way to use CRCS program to secure agricultural workforces in the latter half of the 2010s. After the consultation with agriculture-related actors in the municipality for a year, we began to call for the CRCS candidates in 2019.” Because transparency and accountability are required for governmental actors to be collaborated with private ones, the preparation period occurs as unavoidable policy cost.

South Korea: Autonomy in Governmental Actors

Since the early 2010s, the government of Korea has promoted its urban dwellers to migrate to rural areas in order to secure human resources in agriculture-related industry. In 2012, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fishery, and Rural Affairs (MAFRA) and the Rural Development Administration (RDA) jointly launched the Return Farm (*guinong-guichon*) Plan to promote the internal migration. This plan includes loan programs to lease the initial cost to begin farm operations up to 300 million Won (USD 200,000) per household (Rural Development Administration, n.d.). Encouraged by severe socioeconomic competition in urban business, more than 20,000 dwellers nationwide have migrated to rural areas per year since 2012 (Rural Development Administration, n.d.). While the government’s Return Farm policy has succeeded to the internal migration to rural areas, however, the return farmers’ insufficient agricultural skill has been one of the major subjects for both the central government and rural areas (Nawakura, 2019). In

⁹ The words “*Kokohore* Japan” means “Discover the potential of Japan” in Japanese.

other words, the training of agricultural skills for the urban-to-rural internal immigrants has been one of the major subjects to secure agricultural workforces in Korea.

The MAFRA and the RDA have offered agricultural extension services for the internal immigrants for more than a decade. Under the guidance of the two central governmental organizations, tuition-free agricultural training programs have been operated by extension service bureaus of provincial governments and agricultural technology centers of municipal governments nationwide (Nawakura, 2019). The trainers in the extension services are local government officers in many cases. To secure the quality of training by municipal governments' officers, provincial governments offer some educational programs to upgrade their teaching and training skills.

Mr. Jin Woo-yong, a coordinator of Agricultural Technology Center of Seoul municipal government, said "Though our program offers only partial know-how for farm operation, the urban-to-rural internal immigrants are active (W. Jin, personal communication, August 21, 2014). They once learn in our Center prior to the migration. And moving to rural areas, they continue the learning by participating in rural municipalities' extension programs" to the author's interview in 2014. The fact above indicates that governmental sector plays important role in securing agricultural workforces in Korea. To brush up the teaching skills of municipal officers as trainers in the agricultural extension services, some provincial governments offer the learning courses for the local officers (Nawakura, 2025).

While the central and local governments in Korea have offered extension programs to secure skilled agricultural workforces, the country's private actors have been less active than the Japan's ones. The National Agricultural Cooperative Federation (NACF) launched its nationwide program "Young Farmer Academy (*Cheongnyeon-nongbu Sagwanhakkyo*)" to train youngsters to professional farmers in the early 2020s (Lee, 2024). While the Japanese agricultural cooperatives prefer to collaborate with local governments to train new young farmers as seen in the case of Nayoro, however, the Young Farmer Academy is an independent program by the NACF (Lee, 2024). In other words, both the governmental and private actors operate their own programs to secure agricultural workforces independently each other.

The autonomous status of the governmental actors enables the central and local governments to revise their agricultural extension programs rapidly responding the changes of agricultural environment. Nawakura (2025) points out that the RDA and the North Chungcheong Province Agricultural Extension Service have frequently revised their policy to train the youth as farmer candidates. Though the Provincial government emphasized the necessity to grow the farmers for high-valued agriculture in the 2010s, for example, the local government shifted its emphasis to grow farmers as the successors for aged incumbent farmers in the 2020s (Nawakura, 2025).

While the government actors hold autonomy from private actors, however, the decentralization since the early 2000s has changed the relations between the central and local governments gradually. Local governments launch their annual plans for agricultural extension and training programs referencing the RDA's policy documents and it has encouraged vertical cooperation between central and local government.

On the other hand, some provincial governments launch their original extension and training programs. The *Gangso-nong* (small professional farmers) is an example of it. As a series of measures to upgrade the efficiency of Korean agriculture, the RDA and the MAFRA have promoted to grow *gangso-nong*, such as small-sized organic farming to produce high-valued vegetable in the early and middle 2010s. Under the pressure of large-sized farming due to trade liberalization, the central governmental organizations have reduced their subsidy for *gangso-nong* since the end of the 2010s. However, some provincial governments sustained their extension programs for *gangso-nong* after the reduction of the central government's subsidy in the early 2020s (Nawakura, 2025). In terms of the relation with the central government, Mr. K, an officer of Agricultural Policy Bureau, South Jeolla Province, said "Today, we the provincial government determine what is needed to be done for agricultural education and training." to the author's interview (K, personal communication, February 1, 2025). The governmental sector is still autonomous to the private sector in Korea's agricultural human resource policies as well as the age of developmental state in the 20th Century, the local governments have gained their autonomous status in recent years.

Concluding Remarks

This study asks why the governmental actors in Korea have revised their policies to secure agricultural workforces faster than those in Japan focusing on the measures for agricultural extension and training. In order to answer the question above, the author implemented literature review and interview of local government officers in the two countries. The result of the author's analysis indicates that the features of developmental state approach in Korea's agricultural policies contribute to the rapid and active revision. While the governmental actors in Korea hold autonomy from private actors, the municipal governments in rural Japan have launched the programs to secure agricultural workforces base on the collaboration with private actors such as agricultural cooperatives. Differently from the age of developmental state in the 20th Century, however, the policy making in Korea has been decentralized recently.

The argument above, however, is based on only literature review and the interview on small number of local officers in Korea and Japan. The empirical analysis with the interview on larger number of officers including the central governments of the two countries is a future subject.

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Appendix

Interviewees

Name	Date	Venue	Language
JIN Woo-yong	Aug. 21, 2014	Agricultural Technology Center, Seoul Metropolitan City	Korean
Ryo NISHIKAWA	Oct. 29, 2024	Agricultural Bureau, Nayoro Municipal Government Office, Nayoro City, Hokkaido	Japanese
Tadao OHTA			
Hiroshi SENGOKU			
Hiroyuki CHIBA	Nov. 12, 2024	Kita-Akita Community Plaza, Kita-Akita City, Akita Prefecture	Japanese
Toshikatsu ASAI			
K (anonymous)	Feb. 1, 2025	South Jeolla Province Agricultural Museum, Yeong-am County, South Jeolla Province	Korean