

society
emerging trends

JAPAN'S GROWING TREND PART-TIME FARMERS

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The frenetic pace of our cosmopolitan lifestyle today has led many to consume in an irresponsible and thoughtless manner. **Hiroyo Hasegawa** shows us an alternative lifestyle in Ayabe, Japan, which may just be the way to inculcate in people, a renewed sensitivity to the environment.



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Practice of the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle.

The global economic crisis, which began with the collapse of US securities house Lehman Brothers in 2008, also triggered a series of business failures and job losses in Japan. The nation was already facing a host of problems. An increasing number of young people are having trouble finding jobs and many people are quitting their jobs early too. The country's self-sufficiency in energy and food had reached a low, at 4% and 40% respectively. Japan has a rapidly aging society, bringing with it problems of managing elderly care. The farming population in particular is getting advanced in years, with more than two-thirds of farmers aged over 65. Moreover, the number of people diagnosed with mental disorders is growing rapidly, and more than 30,000 people commit suicide each year.

Meanwhile, a new lifestyle is slowly becoming popular. Some think this way of living, called the "Half-Farmer/Half-X" lifestyle, has the potential to significantly reduce or gradually resolve such problems brought about by an aging population, and to help the nation realise a more attractive future with diverse options.

A 21st Century Lifestyle: Friendly to Planet, Friendly to People

The concept of the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle was first proposed in the mid-1990s by Naoki Shiomi, who now lives in the city of Ayabe in the northern part of Kyoto Prefecture. The basic idea is that people pursue farming, not so much as a business but to grow food for their own family, while being

constructively involved in society by realising their personal passions -- something Shiomi called their "X" factor. The "X" represents the questions each person must answer to find out what they really prefer or want to do, and what they can do for others, while discovering their personal mission, or their "true" calling in life.

Shiomi began pursuing this lifestyle several years ago, and now helps many people find their own "X". He said that through these practices, he strongly sensed that this kind of lifestyle is one of the best ways of making the most of each individual's talent. It also diverts from the twentieth-century style of mass production, mass consumption, mass and long-distance transportation, and mass disposal, while pointing the way to happier lives and a more sustainable Earth.

Lifestyle inspired by environmental problems

Shiomi first came up with this idea while considering the solutions to environmental problems, and this encouraged him to start the quest for a better lifestyle. When he left his hometown of Ayabe and moved to another urban area, he began to consider environmental problems from the perspective of future generations and pondered how he should live. As a result, he felt a strong ambition to start subsistence farming to enable his family to grow crops at least for their own consumption.

Shiomi also believes that environmental issues are largely associated with people's attitudes and mindsets, an example being that some people shop and spend money on things they don't really need just to satisfy an emotional void. In

industrialised countries for example, many people tend to consume goods haphazardly in order to feel fulfilled, or buy goods on impulse after being persuaded by sources such as commercial advertisements in the media and in-store displays.

While practising such consumption patterns, people seldom have the time to give more than a passing thought to the global environment, or the working conditions of the producers of the goods they buy. When shopping, they often put things into their baskets without even considering factors like the necessity and durability of the products, or whether using them matches their own values. Shiomi believes the root causes of today's environmental problems are most likely linked to many people's immature ways of trying to find their own identity, as well as their desire to simply consume, which leads to a form of irresponsible consumption behaviour that resembles addiction.

Shiomi discovered a fundamental truth by living the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle back in his rural hometown of Ayabe. He found contentment in making less money but staying spiritually enriched. Shiomi is not alone, others living the same lifestyle in Ayabe find this to be true as well, as similar comments from other practitioners of the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle have increased in recent years. Basically, they are contented with their lives, in which they enjoy the practice of everyday farming, even on a small scale, and at the same time they work on developing a satisfying vocation, therefore not turning so easily to thoughtless consumption, and in fact finding less need for it. In addition, as agriculture is integrally affected by weather, water, soil, air, and other natural elements, and has become part of their daily lives, they cannot help but shift their focus to the natural world, and become sensitive to changes in the environment. Naturally, these farmers develop a "sense of wonder" for the natural environment, as described by Rachel Carson, author of the book "Silent Spring."

Farming Complements a Person's "X" Factor

Shiomi explains that he recommends the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle, as people can enrich both their farming lifestyle and their vocations of choice at the same time. In the process of growing crops, people experience nature directly and begin to harmonise with it. They also feel more closely connected in mind and body with the cycles of life, through the experience of being close to life and death and nurturing living things. In modern times, where places of production and consumption are almost completely separate, being involved with growing crops could be instrumental for many people to regain a sensitivity and sensibility about the natural world.

Meanwhile, almost everyone wonders from time to time who they really are, and what the purpose of their life is. According to Shiomi, the answer to these questions lies in practising the "X" each person is called to do. When truly engaged in their "X", he says, people might even forget about sleeping and eating, be filled with enthusiasm, truly enjoy their life, and feel utterly fulfilled. The experience of growing in sensitivity by focusing on farming and deeper reflection, while sharpening sensibility through earnest work, often brings out the best in people while they work on their personal calling. Not forgetting, people tend to feel immeasurably more secure in this economic crisis when they know they have enough food to survive on, at least until the next summer.

The truth behind affluence

In the old days, having many valuable possessions was considered a sign of affluence, and people actively pursued this status, but lately, people's values have been changing slowly but steadily. Nowadays, more people are asking themselves if they will be truly happy if they have that many possessions.

Shiomi has communicated the concept of the Half-Farmer/

Community exploring their "X".



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“LIVING IN THE COUNTRYSIDE IS NOT NECESSARILY A PREREQUISITE TO LIVING THE HALF-FARMER/HALF-X LIFESTYLE.”

Half-X lifestyle through lectures, books and the Internet, and he says that people in their twenties to forties, the so-called “debt generation,” also show particularly strong interest in his ideas. This seems to be due to the fact that this generation appears to be the ones that will have to settle the debts left from the previous generation, which over-consumed natural resources and abused the environment. A steadily increasing number of young people are recognising that it’s better to share benefits rather than monopolise them, to live life commensurating with one’s income level rather than pursue luxuries they don’t need, and keep pace with the flow of nature rather than lead a hectic life which consumes energy, and sacrifices the well-being of the environment. These people are working to incorporate this more comfortable lifestyle into their daily lives.

Many people in Ayabe are now exploring their own “X,” regardless of their age and gender and where they came from. In fact, a number of people have become successful while exploring their “X,” and have helped in motivating their communities at the same time. For example, a woman over 70 started to offer accommodation in her spacious farmhouse as a form of green tourism business. Another former teacher began growing roses in memory of Anne Frank, and donated them as symbols of peace. There’s also a married couple dealing in art paintings, while cultivating their sensitivity to nature and engaging in farming. Upon hearing stories like these, more and more people from countries such as Taiwan have come to visit Ayabe to see how the people there live. Hence, one of Shiomi’s books has been translated into Chinese to cater to the Taiwanese.

It is not only in Ayabe that this is happening, but also other regions throughout Japan, where an increasing number of people are following the Half-Farmer/Half-X concept and

leading more enriched and happy lives. Shiomi believes such a new model which helps in creating more fulfilling and meaningful lives can be adopted in a society where people have found their own “X”. He believes that the creation of such a society is his own “X” quest.

Living in the countryside is not necessarily a prerequisite to living the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle. There are many ways to grow plants - on balconies, rooftops, weekend farm plots and community gardens. Importantly, a flexible style of thinking is necessary to live the Half-Farmer/Half-X lifestyle, and nothing can be perfect from the start. Accomplishing just a percent of a person’s ideal way of farming and exploring their personal “X” is progress in itself; there is no formula that must be followed. People should start with what is possible right now.

The Half-Farmer/Half-X concept is gaining popularity, and is seen as a ray of light leading the way to a better lifestyle in this modern society, which is facing various problems related to self-sufficiency, food supply, employment, mental issues, environmental issues, aging, energy, education, money-centrism and so on. Hopefully, more remedies to the problems of our age will be revealed in the next ten years or less, and will include new alternative lifestyles like the one Shiomi lives and proposes.

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