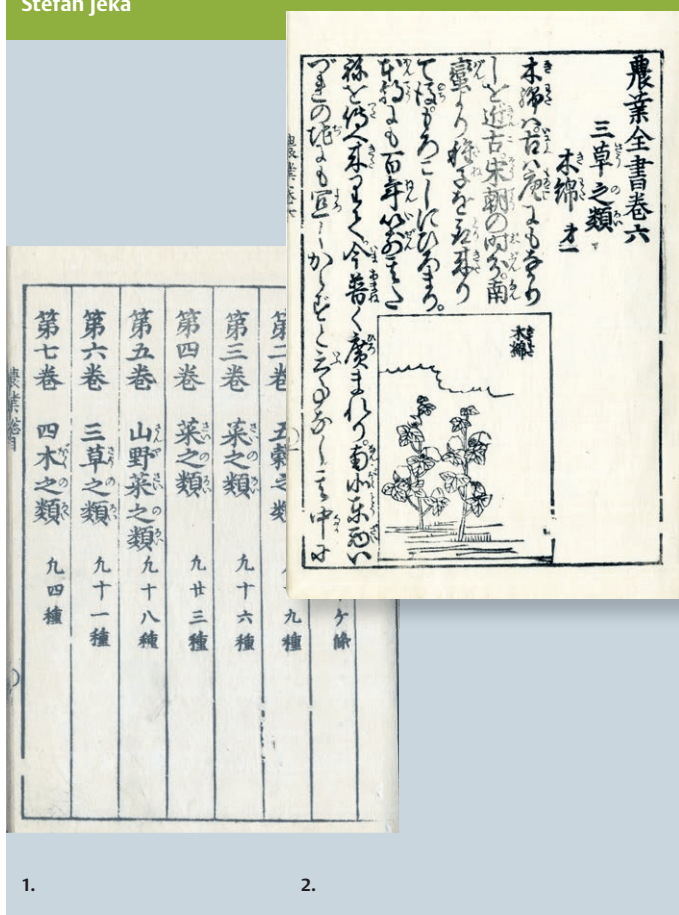


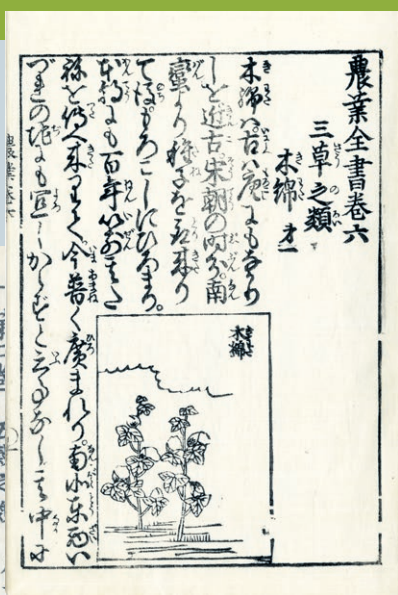
Breaking the plough

Economic and social developments significantly stimulated both quantity and genre variety of the literary production in Tokugawa era Japan (1603-1868). Hitherto most western academic discussion shows a strong affinity to philosophical treatises and economical theories of prominent scholars, records of the ruling class and the popular literature of the townspeople. Studies about works classified as *nôsho*, writings concerning agricultural matters, are notably scarce. One may assume this lack of interest would simply reflect an absence of intellectual depth within these most diverse texts, but a closer look reveals quite the opposite and shows links to current global struggles.

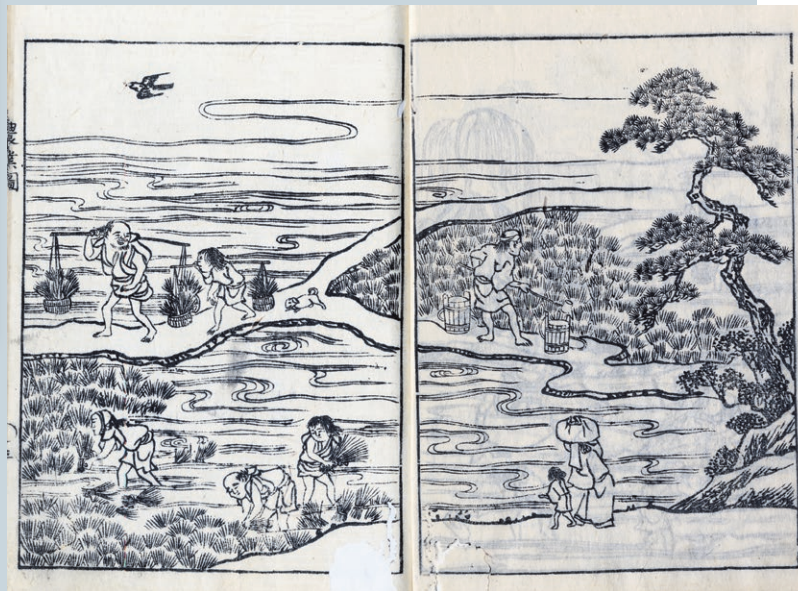
Stefan Jeka



1.



2.



3.

TAKING THE CULTIVATION OF CROPS as the basis of nearly any given society, in the past as well as in the present, classical Chinese writings frequently stress the importance of agriculture:

When the granaries are well filled, the people will obey the laws and the rules of courtesy. When garments and food suffice for their needs, they will distinguish between honor and shame.²

Thus, farming is crucial to the building of a society for it secures people's livelihoods by providing food, clothes and shelter. In the end, it is required for maintaining peace and works as the foundation for education. This view on farming is located at the very heart of Confucian philosophy and understanding of agriculture's impact on political actions and vice versa.

Chinese writings were the main authoritative sources of knowledge in Japan for a considerable time and books imported from the continent dealing with agriculture can be traced back to the 9th century.³ But access to these works was limited to an elite group, who were uninterested in detailed information about farming itself. Therefore, elaborate works like the *Qí-mín yāo-shù* [Main Techniques for the Welfare of the People; around 550] were mainly used by court physicians for adopting the botanic-pharmacological *honzôgaku* [Teachings on materia medica], and by scholars of the related *meibutsugaku* [Teaching about the naming of things] to assign Chinese characters to plants and herbs growing on the Japanese archipelago.

Writings about agriculture composed in Japan can be dated back as early as the 8th century, when Empress Genmei (661-721) ordered the compilation of the *fudoki* [Chronicles of Wind and Earth] in 713. The *fudoki* contain geographical, mythical and ethnological information, as well as content about farming and agricultural products of all provinces. Compiled solely for being used at court they cannot be described as *nôsho*. So what then exactly can be classified as *nôsho*?

The genre trouble

The aforementioned works are of a rather encyclopaedic character used by a small elite group, or are concerned

with the administrative aspects of agriculture and other knowledge necessary for government officials. In contrast, many *nôsho* show a more practical approach to farming and are mostly packed with down-to-earth advice for tax paying farmers. This can be described as one key feature of the *nôsho*; simultaneously, it gives us a hint about who authored them, and reflects the time they came into being.

The historian Richard Rubinger states, about the spread of popular literacy in early modern Japan, that most commoners in the countryside obtained rudimentary reading and writing skills (*tenarai*) through the hands of temple and shrine priests, or at private writing schools in urban areas. But as the village leaders' function was to mediate between the peasants and government officials, they required advanced literacy training at a competitive high level. Such sophisticated education was received within these elite families during most of the Tokugawa period, which is why many of the texts now classified as *nôsho* emerged from the strata of the rural elite. As handwritten documents they were initially passed down from one family head to his successor and possibly considered as secret wisdom, carefully preserved to secure the family's prosperity.

Due to differences in the individual family's engagement in agribusiness, local and social background, access to and participation in market places and, of course, the authors' literary skills, content and form of these *nôsho* vary greatly. In addition to advice about cultivation they even include diaries about farming activities, calendars and weather conditions, accounting books showing expenses for tools, seed and fertilizer, prices and revenues of crops, but also essays on (Confucian) morals and ethics.

Similarly, the language used in the documents ranges from Chinese (*kanbun*) and epistolary style (*sôrôbun*) to the most frequently used mixture of *kana* syllables and Chinese characters with their readings (*furigana*) given additionally. Handwritten texts on morals and ethics may have been used as a family's private teaching materials and house records were hardly intended for readers from outside. However,

the illustrated woodblock-printed manuals in a comprehensible style were obviously meant for a wider audience. They were most possibly addressed to (other) village headmen, for they were able to read and explain their content, thereby spreading advanced knowledge about economics and farming to the semi- and illiterate.

The emergence of *nôsho*

According to the historian Tsukuba Hisaharu, Japan's written culture was without *nôsho* well until the early modern times. In this time peace prevailed under the Tokugawa hegemony, but Japan was largely secluded, by governmental edict, from nearly any direct contact with the rest of the world. Likewise, the worlds of the former landowning warriors and peasants became separated, transforming the first group into a bureaucratic elite, paid in rice stipends to be produced by the latter. But commercial growth, the spread of the monetary system and diversification of economy paved the way for the emergence of written essays focusing on the needs of the peasantry.

The samurai Doi Seiryô (1546-1629) of Iyo province on Shikoku, for example, states in his *Seiryôki* [Chronicles of Seiryô; published around 1629-54], that it is the ruler's obligation to stipulate agrarian output in order to relieve people from hunger and suffering. This stipulation has to be made effective by educating the farmers. The *Seiryôki* is considered to be the first *nôsho* of its kind and the first work registered in the *Nihon nôsho zenshû* [Compiled Nôsho of Japan; 1977-1999], which lists more than 300 works from before the year 1888. So to say, the *nôsho* of Japan rooted in the grounds of agriculture already conducted for a great many of centuries and also sprouted off the ideological seeds of Confucian ethics and thinking about economy, but came into bloom only quite recently.

The Compendium of Agriculture

Of all *nôsho*, the *Nôgyô zensho* [Compendium of Agriculture; 1697] by Miyazaki Yasusada (1623-1697) stands alone as the great prototype of early modern Japanese treatises on agriculture and went through several reprints during the whole Tokugawa era. Miyazaki was of samurai descent and the son of a commissioner for forestry affairs (*sanrin bugyô*) in the territory of Aki province on Kyushu. He became acquainted with the subject early on, and possessed the literary skills to consult authoritative Chinese works, most specifically the *Nóng-zhèng quán-shū* [Compendium of Agricultural Administration; 1639] by Xú Guāng-qī (1562-1633).

Even though its structural influence is evident in Miyazaki's own Compendium, his endeavour went beyond a mere repetition and transportation of Chinese knowledge. He travelled the countryside, interviewed the old and skilled peasants (*rônô*), and built up his own empirical farming experiences during almost forty years. This enabled him to review the Chinese texts, select the most useful information, and adjust them to the conditions in Japan. It is one of the most striking features of the *Nôgyô zensho*, for it reflects Miyazaki's approach to a synthesis of theory and practical experience; an approach adopted by later authors, like Sunagawa Yasui for the compilation of his *Nôjutsu kansaiki* [Accurate record of the mirror of agricultural techniques; 1723].⁴

In ten volumes, Miyazaki provides basic information on soil preparation, selection of seeds, the right time of sowing, irrigation, harvesting and the like – familiar issues of cultivation. In addition to the common practice of using manure and waste, Miyazaki promotes the use of commercial fertilizers such as dried fish and seed cakes left from oil pressing. This demonstrates the high levels of commerce that Japanese agriculture was involved in; at least in the most advanced areas in the south-west, or close to cities and suburbs. Regional and climatic differences are acknowledged by, for example, Hosoi Yoshimaro (?-1788), who takes information from the *Compendium* and adapts it to his home region in his *Nôgyô toki no shiori* [Bookmark for the time of farming; 1785].

The eleventh volume was added by Kaibara Rakken (1625-1702), older brother to the famous Neo-Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekken (1630-1714), and deals with the administrative aspects Miyazaki skipped almost entirely. Miyazaki's focus on the needs of peasants, and the practical use of a revised theoretical knowledge transmitted in vernacular Japanese, shows that the *Compendium* was not intended to be a text for scholarly discussion or government officials, but to be a guidebook for the economic benefits of the Japanese farmers. Although Miyazaki's outstanding role in the history of Japanese writing on agricultural matters is widely acknowledged and perpetually mentioned by Western scholars, his impact on many of the following authors of *nôsho* (throughout the Tokugawa era) regarding content, structure and even methodological approach is not thoroughly recognised.

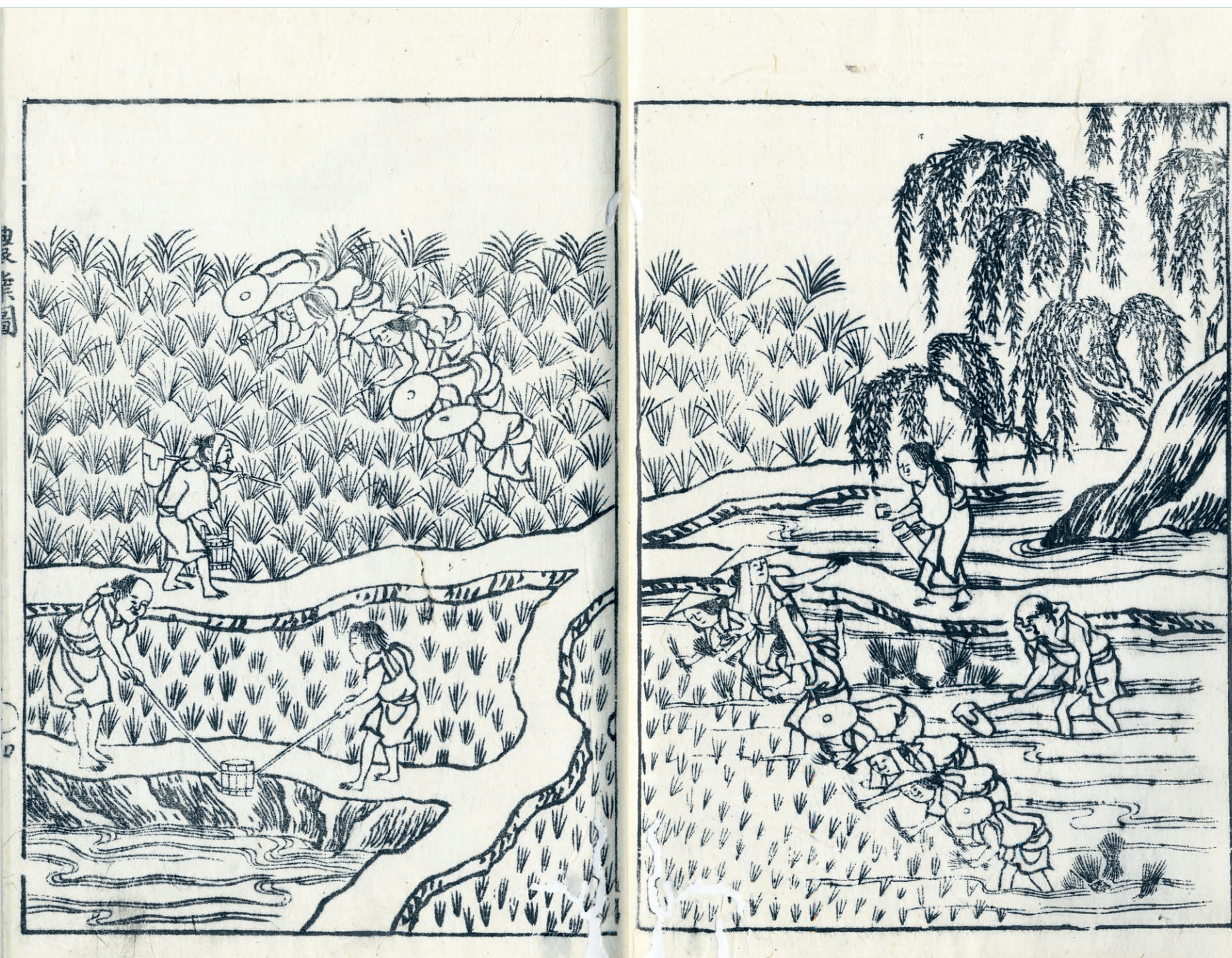
On studying agricultural guidebooks of early modern Japan¹

Fig. 1: *Nōgyō zensho*, woodblock-print dated 1815. Table of content listing the first seven out of eleven chapters with the heading of each section and number of plant specimens contained.

Fig. 2: *Nōgyō zensho*, woodblock-print dated 1815. First page of the 6th volume titled *San sō no rui* [Varieties of the three grasses (shrubs)], with instructions for the proper cultivation of the cash-crop cotton (*kiwata*).

Fig. 3: *Nōgyō zensho*, woodblock-print dated 1815. Two pages from a series of ten scenes called *Nōgyō no zu* [Images of farming], depicting the cultivation of rice: preparing the paddy fields, planting the rice seedlings, irrigation, harvest and finally the measuring and taxation of the threshed rice by officials. The pages shown demonstrate severe damage done by bookworm.

Fig. 4: *Nōgyō zensho*, woodblock-print dated 1815. Two pages from a series of ten scenes called *Nōgyō no zu* [Images of farming]. The pages shown demonstrate severe damage done by bookworm.



4.

As expressed at the beginning of this article, the limited interest of western scholars for *nōsho* seems to reflect the belief that agricultural writings in general are not a prolific source. Additionally, in spite of being subsumed under one generic category, their diverse content and style may perhaps confuse and discourage interested scholars. Yet they are a treasure trove ready to be discovered.

Guides for the world of today

While Miyazaki complained in his 1697 *Compendium* that highly educated government officials or scholars have neither interest in nor knowledge about agriculture and therefore are not capable of educating the people properly in these matters, the farmer and philosopher Fukuoka Masanobu described quite a similar view in 1975: "Because the Ministry of Agriculture has no clear idea of what should be grown in the first place, and because it does not understand the connection between what is grown in the fields and the people's diet, a consistent agricultural policy remains an impossibility. [...] Until now the line of thought among modern economists has been that small scale, self-sufficient farming is wrong – that it is a primitive kind of agriculture – one that should be eliminated as soon as possible."⁵

Fortunately, the situation may start to change as international organisations involved in development cooperation, like the United Nations, today openly discuss how current systems of extensive agriculture create more problems than they are able to solve in the short term. But in spite of scientific evidence and experiences from around the globe, the most prevailing view is still that small scale, intensive farming is unproductive and that indigenous knowledge is backward; this view also continues to be promoted by multinational corporations.⁶

In this respect, it is not my opinion that the *nōsho* of early modern Japan show us a way 'back to paradise'; scholars and statesmen in China and Japan alike tried to abandon a money-economy along with its negative side effects, and return to the past conditions of a mythical golden age of the sages, and failed. Nevertheless, early modern Japanese *nōsho* reveal attempts to respond to the intertwined social,

environmental and economic problems such as partial rural depopulation, speculation, soil erosion, etc., which are major reasons for increasing poverty, and issues of food security and food sovereignty. These topics are ones that can also be found in today's newspapers, and which can easily be expanded into discussions about social and ecological sustainability and challenges for energy supply, as was done recently in The Newsletter by Mairon Bastos Lima.⁷ The *nōsho* of early modern Japan might shed some light on current global challenges from a historic perspective and help us to modify the pejorative view on small-scale agriculture.

Looking at early modern Japan, with its secluded economy heavily dependent on agriculture and the cultivation of crops, with the taxes and salaries of the bureaucratic officials paid in kind – essays that enhance the agricultural output in various ways touch on every economical, social and cultural aspect of everyday life then, and continue to do so today. Although only described briefly here, the statements made so far don't question why one should study the agricultural writings of early modern Japan, but why they aren't studied more. Like the popular literature of the townspeople was once too profane for scholarly attention, the various *nōsho* still appear to be purposely overlooked; I do hope that one day they will be reconsidered and recognised as objects for further study.

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Notes

- I deeply acknowledge my debt to Professor Klaus Müller, whose unpublished thesis about the agricultural writings of early modern Japan of 1976 encouraged my studies and the writing of this article.
- T'an, Po-fu (et al.). 1954. *Economic dialogues in ancient China: selections from the Kuan-tzū, a book written probably three centuries before Christ*, Illinois: Maverick, p.31.
- As listed in the *Nihonkoku genzai sho mokuroku* [Catalogue of books currently in Japan] compiled in the 9th century.
- Most possibly a pen name, life dates unknown. See Tokunaga, 1994: 403-404.
- See Fukuoka, 2009: 108.
- Crops of the Future - How to feed the world in 2050?* Documentary by Marie-Monique Robin, shown on the German/Francophone programme ARTE on 4 September 2012.
- Based on a chapter of *Secure Oil and Alternative Energy* (Amineh & Yang 2012), Mairon Bastos Lima points out the importance of involving small-scale farmers in national programs to reduce rural-urban migration and thus fighting poverty for Brazil. Bastos Lima, M. 2012. 'The Brazilian biofuel industry: achievements, challenges and geopolitics', *The Newsletter*, Vol. 62, Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, p.35.

All pictures courtesy of Professor Wolfgang Michel.