More-than-Human Commoning through Women's *Kokorozashi* Business for Collective Well-being: A Case from Aging and Depopulating Rural Japan

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ABSTRACT

Elderly women in depopulating and aging rural Japan confront their everyday challenges collectively through business practices based on *kokorozashi* – altruistic entrepreneurial practices through which they generate livelihoods and improve collective well-being. Drastic demographic changes and intensified economic globalization in the 1980s provoked precarity in rural livelihoods that depend on natural resource management. These changes simultaneously have opened up opportunities for women to start businesses assisted by state policies for rural revitalization and women's empowerment. Previous studies have examined different contributions and pathways that rural women's businesses have made to collective well-being. These studies rarely investigate how ethics come into play in collective natural resource management and its constitutive relationships among commons, subjectivities, and more-than-human elements. Drawing on a postcapitalist feminist political ecology's approach to commoning, we investigate power dynamics and intersecting affective processes, including those related to gender, aging bodies, rurality, and more-than-human elements and demonstrate how ethical subjectivities and more-than-human communities are emerging in aging and depopulating rural Japan.

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INTRODUCTION

Elderly women in depopulating and aging rural Japan confront challenges together through business based on *kokorozashi* – altruistic entrepreneurial practices through which they generate livelihoods and improve collective well-being (Iwasaki & Miyaki, 2001; Miyaki, 1996). The drastic depopulation of rural areas,[1] which was certainly under way by the mid 1960s (MAFF, 2020), has created shortages in labor and capital that threaten the maintenance of natural resources and the rural livelihoods that depend on them (e.g., forestry and agriculture). Globalized competition within the post-WWII economy has further driven downward socio-ecological changes, exacerbating threats to rural sustainability and well-being. However, the indeterminacy and instability (Tsing, 2015) produced by these challenges have opened up spaces for the emergence of novel practices. Within these precarious contexts, rural women have drawn on existing resources, such as social networks, skills, state funding, cooking, and backyard farming, to produce a diversity of mechanisms that produce livelihoods, support communities, and develop themselves (Iwasaki & Miyaki, 2001).

The Japanese state has long sponsored interventions for rural development and women's empowerment. In the 1980s public funding began to target rural revitalization to ease economic stagnation in rural areas that resulted from an increasingly imbalanced distribution of both population and wealth between rural and urban areas (Odagiri & Hashiguchi, 2018). The fourth national comprehensive development plan (1987) promoted resort development that encouraged human and economic flows from urban to rural areas through activities like environmental education, ecotourism, and rural vacation lodging. These initiatives aimed to support rural communities' financially independent integration into competitive capitalist markets. Women's empowerment has been another thread in state funding for rural areas. The importance and nature of support for women have shifted in keeping with the international and national calls for women's empowerment that strengthened with the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The first political intervention explicitly for women in rural agrarian contexts was the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries' (MAFF) mid-term vision (1992) action plan for rural women that ran till 2001. This plan promoted their economic independence and entrepreneurship by encouraging their participation in, among other things, decision making and capacity building to further institutionalize local businesses. The Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas Basic Act adopted by MAFF in 1999, which highlighted gender equality in the agricultural sector, was one of the most significant joint efforts that laid foundations for the consecutive attempts for rural women's leadership in rural revitalization and women's empowerment (Fujii, 2007; Fujimoto, 2004). Countless now existing rural women's local businesses across Japan emerged from this background.

Many Japanese studies on rural women's business use the term *kokorozashi* which indicates an intention other than monetary return, often understood as a contribution to collective well-being (Iwasaki & Miyaki, 2001; Miyaki, 1996). These so-called "*kokorozashi* businesses" pursue social goals and often utilize local resources and potential latent that are overlooked by conventional businesses and economic initiatives, such as unemployed elderly women, unused rice fields, and traditional knowledge (Iwasaki & Miyaki, 2001; Miyaki, 1996; Nishiyama & Odagiri, 2015; Ogawa, 2014; Sawano, 2012). Sawano (2012) identifies rural women's *kokorozashi* business as benefitting social welfare and both rural and urban communities. They, on their terms, enable rural and urban consumers and producers to "live together" (p. 193).

Somewhat departing from the findings of studies on rural women's business, popular understandings in state narratives essentialize rural women in business as, once empowered by state support, altruistic saviors who contribute to shrinking local economies (Akitsu, Fujii, Shibuya, Kashiwao, & Ôoishi, 2007; Iwashima, 2020). Japanese rural gender scholars challenged this essentialized portrayal. They argue that existing studies rarely consider rural women's business as embodied, relational and dynamic practice (Akitsu et al., 2007). Those state narratives rarely question how the rhetorical use of women's empowerment via socially engaged business bind women to gendered divisions of labor within rural households (Watanabe, 2009). They tend to ignore power dynamics found in other settings where women are subordinated and paid less or nothing for their labour, in contrast to labour that typically involves better payment and higher status, and tend to overlook the gender imbalances that become more pronounced in rural settings (Amano, 2001; Iwashima & Sato, 2022). They also rarely recognize heterogeneity within the women studied (Iwashima, 2020). Furthermore, from the perspectives provided by feminist political ecology and community economies, Japanese commons studies remain, with a few exceptions that recognize locally managed commons as "communal and collaborative" (Mitsumata, Suga, & Inoue, 2010b), predominantly anthropocentric: they place humans at the center at the expense of the ethical, contingent and ambivalent co-constructions arising from the interaction of the diverse elements, such as humans, natural resources and other more-than-human elements, such as regional climate, knowledge, culture, and policies, in the production of commons. State narratives and most

studies, in summary, tend not to see how women enact diverse ethical subjectivities that work towards collective well-being derived from dynamic intersecting socio-ecological relationships that are both contingent and ambivalent. They tend to highlight the altruistic aspect, which masks the suffering and challenges involved in women's attempts to produce livelihoods and collective well-being (Elmhirst & Darmastuti, 2015; Sato & Alarcón, 2019; Tsuru, 2007).

To complement those existing studies and to provide better support for rural women's attempts to contribute to collective well-being through collective livelihood production, we have chosen to study how *kokorozashi* has manifested in entrepreneurial activities around *soba* (buckwheat) undertaken by a women's business called *Kunma Suisha-no-Sato* (hereafter *Suisha*) in rural Shizuoka, Japan. Historically, the region flourished through forestry and agricultural industries that took advantage of the mountainous landscape laced with rivers that provided good transportation (Fujiwara & Ariki, 1978). The region where *Suisha* is located, like many others, has suffered from the decline of conventional livelihoods, accompanied by aging and depopulation since the post-WWII high economic growth period of the 1960s. The space created by the retreat of typical enterprises, together with state funding and the continued dominance of the capitalist market and neoliberal governance, provided opportunities for local women who had already worked together in different local women's groups across rural Japan to establish businesses. Like many other initiatives, *Suisha*, one product of this intersection of circumstances (Ashitanonihonwotsukurukyôkai, 1984), received generous support from the state for rural revitalization and women's empowerment when they initiated their business. What is atypical is that they have outlived many other similar initiatives even after the end of this support. From its inception, *Suisha* diversified its food business, from food processing and sales to running cooking and farming workshops to ecotourism in order to respond to changing challenges. Consistent with studies that recognize altruism in rural women's economic activities that led to collective well-being (Fujii, 2011; Fujimoto, 2004; Hara-Fukuyo & Ôchi, 2012; Tsuru, 2019; Watanabe, 2009), Sawano (2012) argued that *Suisha*'s *kokorozashi* business shifted their focus from personal matters to social welfare and that their business success enabled community revitalization (p.158).

Building on overlapping yet somewhat disparate Japanese rural studies on gender, women's business and commons (Iwasaki & Miyaki, 2001; Miyaki, 1996; Sawano, 2012; Tsuru, 2019), we use a postcapitalist feminist political ecology's approach to commoning to explore how relationships among commons, subjectivities and more-than-human elements, such as natural resources, regional climate, knowledges and policies around *soba*. In the continuous production of collective well-being, those elements as part of *Suisha*'s business are ethically negotiated and arranged. Our postcapitalist feminist political ecology approach to commoning derives from feminist political ecology, community economies and commons studies. It allows us to see humans, not as central, but as a part of continuous practices of commoning. Commons, subjectivities and more-than-human elements are seen as co-constituting through processes of commoning that create subjects, governance and ethical practices in the relational and contingent processes of producing collective well-being (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, & Healy, 2018; Harcourt, 2019; Linebaugh, 2008; Nightingale, 2015; Sato & Alarcón, 2019; Singh, 2017). This approach can augment existing Japanese rural studies on gender, women's business and commons on gender, women's business and commons by bringing power dynamics and the intersectionality between gender, aging bodies, rurality in affective relations. It illuminates more-than-human elements involved in governing commons in aging and depopulating rural Japan that are basis of emerging ethical subjectivities and more-than-human communities in aging and depopulating rural Japan. Simultaneously, this paper enriches the empirical basis of commoning, feminist political ecology, community economies and commons studies by studying socio-ecological relations in a Japanese context.

In the following we first review existing studies on rural livelihoods, commons concerning natural resource management and rural women's business in Japan. We then introduce our case study and describe our methods which support a description of a broad diversity of ethical negotiations and arrangements over commons. Our conclusion uses the insights made possible by using our postcapitalist feminist political ecology perspective to discuss its possible contribution to both study and policy in this and similar circumstances.

RURAL LIVELIHOODS, COMMONS AND WOMEN'S BUSINESS

Natural resources are the foundation of rural livelihoods, so their use and management are key concerns. According to Ostrom (1990), responsible individuals who depend on a shared resource system set rules regarding its governance and organization to ensure "the long-term sustenance of

the resource system itself" (Ostrom, 1990, p. 31). Similarly, Japanese commons studies generally focus on systems around natural resources[2] explained by using the modern concepts of property and use. With this focus, they show different human actors and natural resources that comprise a "communal and collaborative living world" (Mitsumata, Suga, & Inoue, 2010a, p. 3) or see how natural resources gain commonality and legitimacy in the human system as "new commons" (Tamura, 2019). Those Japanese commons studies underpin the importance of the context built on socio-political and -economic relations of humans and nature (Minoura, 2006; Miyauchi, 2006; Murota & Mitsumata, 2004; Saito & Mitsumata, 2010), which can blur the public-private divide, unlike those studies that exclusively underline the autonomy derived from local initiatives alone.

Despite growing examination and enriched theories that recognize commons more in terms of mutually constitutive relationships than as things, neither seeing commons as process, nor the term commoning is broadly understood in Japanese commons studies. Some Japanese commons studies recognize non-humans, for example, sound (Minoura, 2006) and squatter areas (Kanebishi, 2006) as part of a shared resource system. Yet, the oft-uniform view of commons as collectively managed natural resources that place humans at the center of the resource system (Miyauchi, 2006) prevents them from seeing the agentic roles of more-than-human elements and limits their examinations to management and ownership of natural resources as an object. Furthermore, the power dynamics whose study is necessary to explain interdependencies between humans and more-than-human elements (Nightingale, 2015) are rarely discussed. In the presence of the dominance of the capitalist market and neoliberal governance, Japanese commons studies generally find possibilities in local commons (Suga, Mitsumata, & Inoue, 2010) or existing autonomous engagements with natural resources (Tabeta, 2004). They tend to see the precarity of commons, the abandonment of collectively managed natural resources, as evidence of the failures of neoliberal capitalist approaches that should be replaced by one based on local and community-based management.

Encouraging autonomous governance in local communities is seen as a solution to the problems attributed to neoliberal capitalist forces. However, in Japanese rural studies, the reduced individual and collective vitality produced by aging and depopulation increases the difficulty rural communities face in sustaining their livelihoods (Ôno, 2005). Rural revitalization emerged as a key national strategy supported by the adoption of the Law on Special Measures for the Activation of Depopulated Areas in 1990 and national government-led rural revitalization efforts[3] have attempted to stimulate local economies (Odagiri & Hashiguchi, 2018).

Consistent with state narratives, a significant body of Japanese rural studies also sees women's businesses as an effective rural livelihood strategy (Iwasaki & Miyaki, 2001). These businesses often take off from the successful experiences of pre-existing local women's groups[4] (Iwashima, 2020) and rely on members' knowledge and skills relevant to everyday healthy eating and living practices (Negishi, 2002). The involvement of these women in business exposes them to the public and the business spheres, both of which typically are the domain of men. Women's businesses, thus, denaturalize the historic confinement of women to the private/domestic spheres.

In this way, scholars in Japanese rural studies have contributed to our understanding of rural women's businesses that have been supported by government interventions. They, however, tend to focus on economic variables at the expense of non-economic outcomes that shape rural women's empowerment (Iwashima, 2020) and well-being. Further, the emphasis on economic impacts of state interventions has limited their study of greater isolation suffered by communities that withdrew their businesses from or did not participate in these revitalization schemes (Love, 2007; Odagiri, 2021).

The simplified, idealistic notion of rural women as caring instruments who can improve economic stagnation in rural Japan with appropriate support (Amano, 2001)[5] is built into state narratives about aging and depopulating rural communities (Iwashima & Sato, 2022) and prejudices research. However, studies focusing on gender and power relations (Elmhirst & Darmastuti, 2015; Sato & Alarcón, 2019; Tsuru, 2007) have found that women are often expected to sacrifice themselves, to take on an increased burden to mitigate negative impacts on others to ensure collective well-being (Fujii, 2011; Fujimoto, 2004; Hara-Fukuyo & Ôchi, 2012; Watanabe, 2009). The essentialist construction of women as caring saviors coupled with blindness to women's self-sacrifice could, directly contrary to intent, both exacerbate gender inequalities and reduce collective well-being.

POSTCAPITALIST FEMINIST POLITICAL ECOLOGY'S APPROACH TO COMMONING

One of the features that limits many studies of commons is their adoption of an understanding of the economy as capitalist (Gibson-Graham, 2006). The community economies approach emphasizes the importance of

multiplicity in enhancing economic interdependence by re-signifying "*all* economic transactions and relations, capitalist and noncapitalist, in terms of their sociality, their interdependence", and their ethical salience in being-in-common as part of, as producing, and as produced by a 'community economy' (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 97, emphasis in original). Recent studies, exemplified by those adopting a community economies approach, see commons as more than pools of natural resources collectively managed by humans for their material profit. Rather, commons is "a property, a practice, or a knowledge (…) shared by a community" (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, p. 130). The community economies approach shifts the focus to the dynamic process of commoning that has us see commons as, following Linebaugh (2008), "a verb, an activity" (p. 279) and diverse interacting processes, in part, of "a struggle – of negotiating access, use, benefit, care, and responsibility" (Gibson-Graham et al., 2018; p. 195), whereas commons is an emergent effect of these constituting processes. This approach also makes the processes visible by which communities that come into contact with monolithic neoliberal capitalist resource governance are gradually stripped of their non-economic dimensions, such as the ethical negotiations and arrangements that produce commons. Taken together, these processes are called uncommoning (Miller, 2019). While these losses, an "anesthetization of the common" (p. 190), may be tolerated when populations feel well served by neoliberal capitalism the vulnerability created by their loss is felt when it abandons them. The precarity revealed by the retreat of neoliberal capitalism can be an opportunity for a "life without the promise of stability" that "both use and refuse capitalist governance" (Tsing, 2015, p. 2). From a postcapitalist community economies perspective, resources are derived from ethical processes in which the resources abandoned or neglected by neoliberal capitalism can be transformed into opportunities for building a community through commoning.

While it is clear that some Japanese commons studies understand commons to be sustained through communal and collaborative practices in the governance of natural resources (Mitsumata et al., 2010a; Suga et al., 2010), linkages between dynamic engagement, the constant emergence of commons and the recognition of practices that shape the commons as ethical are missing. Thus, these studies do not naturally see the co-constitutive practices that productively recognize more-than-human elements, not only as resources, but as necessary counterparts in the process of producing commons. This gap is well addressed by the adoption of Latour's "learning to be affected" (2004, as cited in Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2010, p. 322) in which commoning subjectivities are recognized as emerging through mutual affective interactions. As Singh (2017) argues, actors become commoners through collectively performing affective care that produces interdependence beyond the human-nature divide. Study through the lens of commoning reveals diverse dimensions through which commons are collectively and continuously produced among diverse humans and more-than-human elements. That is, studying collective negotiations among diverse actors and elements in processes of commoning makes their practices and subjectivities recognizable as ethical. The commoning lens illuminate how both understandings of and the practices that produce collective well-being emerge from ethical negotiations (Dombroski, Diprose, & Boles, 2019; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Linebaugh, 2008; Sato & Alarcón, 2019; Trauger & Passidomo, 2012). It guides us to capture the emergence of community economies and opportunities for building a community by understanding how relationships among commons, subjectivities and more-than-human elements, such as *soba*, farmlands, soil, agroecosystems, and physical conditions such as climate, aging, and corporeality, as part of *Suisha*'s business, are ethically negotiated and arranged in the continuous production of collective well-being.

Furthermore, recognition of gender and other intersecting power dynamics and more-than-human elements that shape ethical negotiations and arrangements for producing commons are strengthened by feminist political ecology (FPE) which allows researchers to recognize commoning subjectivities from intersecting gender and other interdependent social and ecological processes (Elmhirst, 2015; Nightingale, 2006; Resurrección, 2017; Rocheleau, 2008; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, & Wangari, 1996; Sultana, 2015; Sundberg, 2015). Sato and Alarcón (2019), for example, were able to describe how women, together with other humans (e.g., family members, local authority, and university researchers) and more-than-human elements, like agave, pests, regional climate, and an inter-communally managed water system, rearranged and transformed their situated socio-ecological relationships through their agave syrup making business while caring for more than biophysical commons in rural Mexico. Nightingale (2015), to provide another example, was able to describe the diversity of shifting masculine subjectivities enacted by Scottish fishermen in relation to specific humans (e.g., themselves and policy makers) together with more-than-human elements (e.g., boat and policy) in diverse socio-ecological settings (e.g., on the board and in a meeting room) in a manner that made clear the importance of institutional aspects in shaping their collective management of natural resources. Moreover, this perspective made it possible to see that contingent and ambivalent processes of gender and other relations may

shape patterns of socio-ecological exclusion and inclusion. While these effects can be detected by analyses attuned to the economic, which is enough to attract concern, these analyses are not naturally able to recognize their sources. For example, Nightingale (2019) was able to show how the construction of ethnic differences and the meanings assigned to them shaped the inclusion and exclusion of women in community forestry management in Nepal.

For our study, we have integrated feminist political ecology's sensitivity to gender and power dynamics into community economies' five dimensions of commoning (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) (Table 1):

- making its *access* wider and shared;
- making its *use* managed more by a community;
- making its *benefit* more widely distributed to a community and possibly beyond;
- making its *care* performed more by community members; and
- making its *responsibility* assumed more by a community.

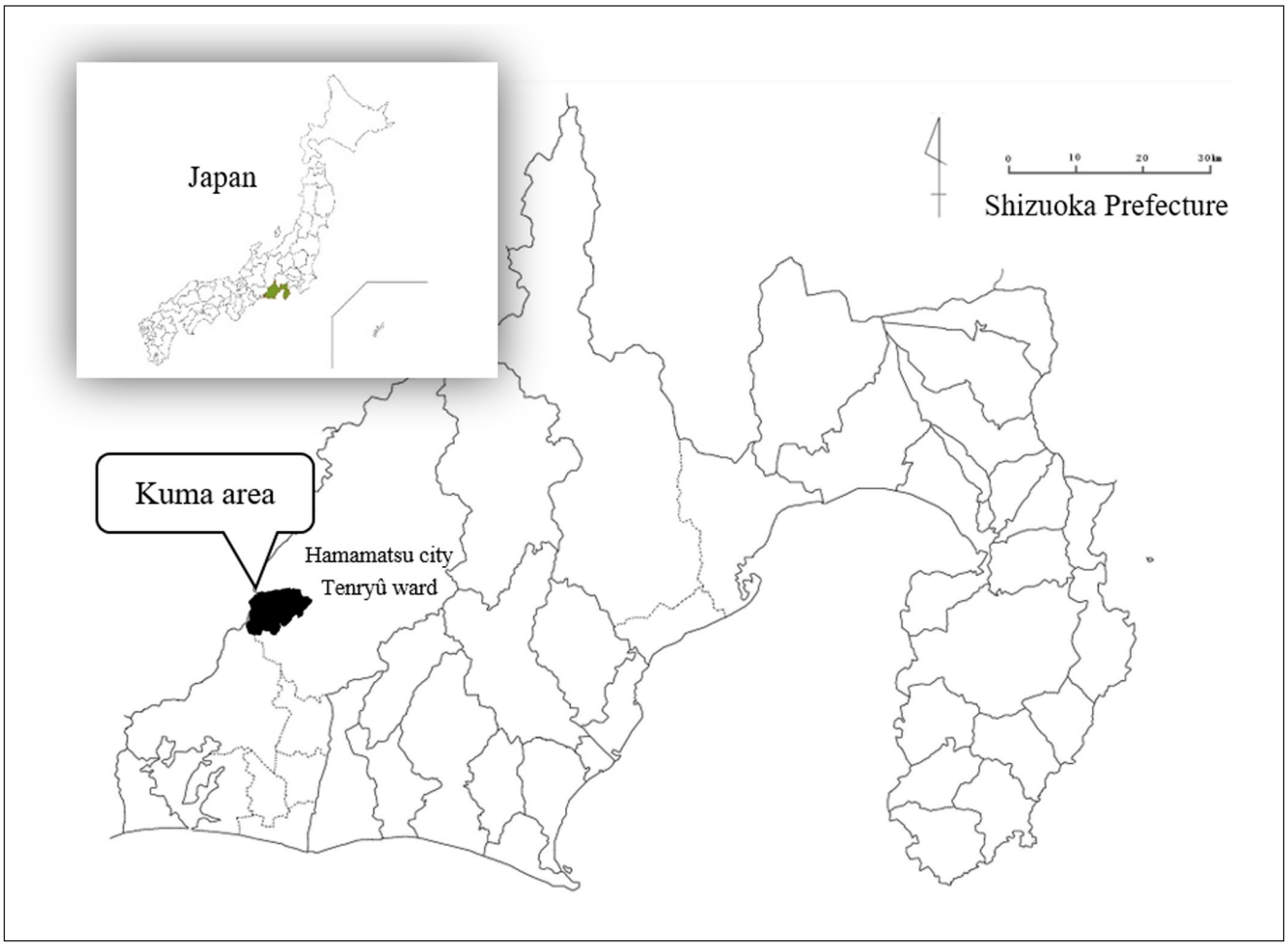
Attending to these five different dimensions of commoning allows us to examine how relationships among commons, subjectivities and more-than-human elements are ethically negotiated and arranged in the processes of *soba* commoning. At the same time, the sensitivities provided by postcapitalist feminist political ecology strengthen our ability to notice intersecting power dynamics shaped by gender, aging, and rurality as they manifest in a specific socio-ecological context beyond capitalist relations.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

Suisha is a women-led local business established by local women from pre-existing different women's groups in 1987 in rural Shizuoka, Japan (see Map 1). These groups have practiced activities associated with their everyday life to improve their lives and enhance their collective wellbeing since the early 1950s. By continuing these collective practices, these women's group played a significant role in local society and took part in different activities at the community level. As another community project for revitalization, these already engaged women became the foundation for *Suisha*. The project started in 1986, initiated mainly by local people and groups with support from the local government. Rural women who gained experiences through participation in other groups joined the project and proposed collective food practices as a means for community revitalization. The proposal was welcomed by other local members and they organized as a women's local food business that could receive further material support from the state. *Suisha* pursued the state objectives

	Access	Use	Benefit	Care	Responsibility
Commoning enclosed property	Narrow	Restricted by owner	Private	Performed by owner or employee	Assumed by owner
Creating new commons	Shared and wide	Negotiated by a community	Widely distributed to community and beyond	Performed by community members	Assumed by community
Commoning unmanaged open-access resources	Unrestricted	Open and unregulated	Finders, keepers	None	None

Table 1 Commons Identi-Kit (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013).



Map 1 Location of study site.

of rural revitalization and women's empowerment and, in return, received subsidies from the regional and local governments that were used for the start-up of their food-based business. Also, they were allowed access to the community forests that are conventionally managed and permitted to use these areas for communal activities. With these sources of support, *Suisha* was able to build food processing facilities and start the business in 1987. The group size[6] has varied been about 20 to 39 members over the years and the original members ranged in age from their 30s to 60s. Currently, 21 members from age 40–77 (the average age 64) out of which ten are above the age 65, work at *Suisha* (as of January 2022). *Suisha* as a long-run local business is selected because their accumulated experiences can show collective efforts to respond to challenges made in everyday practices on farmlands, in forests, and as a community. Most of the founding members are now retired, have moved out of the area or have passed on so they do not work at *Suisha* anymore. Accordingly, members working at *Suisha* have been replaced and regenerated by newly joining members. Throughout the years, most of the members have been women.[7] The diverse activities of *Suisha* are shared among the members, their work schedule is flexible, and members' labor contribution, determined by availability, ranges from a few days a month to those who work full-time.

Handmade *soba* noodles, first using self-cultivated and then domestically sourced buckwheat flour, are a key commodity for *Suisha*. *Soba* is broadly cultivated in Japan because of its vigorous nature on poor soil. *Soba* noodles are a very popular, unpretentious, and when connected to rural production, a nostalgic agriproduct. *Suisha*'s *soba* cultivation was also encouraged by both national and regional schemes associated with rice farming. The former promotes the utilization of unused rice fields through national financial support whereas the latter aims at financially supporting existing rice farming practices at the municipality level. Generally, rice farming in the post-war period has been controversial in Japanese agricultural policies in terms of its intense political interventions at the national and local levels, including rice production adjustment programs, a pricing policy, a set-aside program, and subsidies for machinery (Kuroda, 2016). These programs secured profits for rice farmers and

simultaneously facilitated increased rice production, which was made excessive by the concurrent shift in Japanese diets away from near-exclusive consumption of rice. The national government then implemented the Agricultural Basic Act (MAFF) in the hope that large-scale rice farming would be more productive, enacted in 1961, resulting in the alteration of rice farming in favor of intensive investment in infrastructure, energy, and labor that consolidated those smaller fields that were appropriate for cost-effective resource use and management. Intensification led to the resulted in the abandonment of rice fields that are either marginal or impossible to consolidate. The resulting abandonment of those small fields that could not be consolidated destabilized relationships between human and natural resources by producing biodiversity loss, landscape changes and pollution (Morimoto, 2011; Takeuchi, 2003, 2010).

Fifty-six percent of the population in *Kuma* is above age 65 (Hamamatsu-city, 2021), which is double the national average (28.4%), and four times the national threshold for an aging society at 14% (Cabinet Office Japan, 2020). *Kuma* is located in the semi-mountainous *Tenryû* district, covering an altitude in the range of 30 – 900 m (Hamamatsu-city, 2012). The district has an oceanic highland climate with an annual average temperature of 15.9 degrees Celsius and annual precipitation of 2100.3 mm (Shizuoka Prefecture, 2018) (fn: Kuma 2502.4 mm). Most of the area is covered by and known for products from its cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) and cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*) forests. Green tea is another pillar of the local livelihoods, also known as *Tenryu-cha*. Additionally, other agriproducts, *kôhana* (*Illicium anisatum*), vegetables, and rice, have been popularly cultivated for sale and household consumption in the area.

This paper is based on fieldwork undertaken by the first author, who is a Japanese female researcher in her 30s originally from an urban area working on a PhD at a Dutch University, from August to November 2018 and October to February 2022. Data collection involved informal conversations with *Suisha* members, agriproducts producers, board members of NPO, local collaborators, retired *Suisha* women, and customers and observation of *Suisha* members' interactions with more-than-human elements, such as agricultural products, farmlands, and regional climate. It also included thirteen semi-structured interviews and ten focus group discussions with *Suisha* members. Group size varied from two to five. Field research was complemented by a review of relevant documents such as minutes of *Suisha* meetings, newspaper articles, and community reports collected from the local people and the community library to triangulate past events together with retrospective accounts obtained from the aforementioned interviews and informal talks. Data were transcribed and coded thematically based on the five dimensions of the community economies' commons identi-kit (access, use, benefit, care, and responsibility) to illustrate relationships between ethical negotiations and arrangements made between humans and more-than-human elements to the continuous production of collective well-being in the processes of *soba* commoning.

ETHICAL NEGOTIATIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS IN *SOBA* COMMONING

Suisha opted for *soba* noodles as a key commodity because it is a very high-volume product that, when produced by organizations such as *Susiha,* is valued for embodying traditional food knowledge and local culture that has been gradually lost in recent decades. *Soba,* as practiced by *Suisha,* materializes politics, knowledge, culture, natural environment, and *kokorozashi*. Below, Table 2 shows *Suisha*'s different dimensions of *soba* commoning: opening *access* more widely, negotiating the *use* more collectively,

ACCESS	USE	BENEFIT	CARE	RESPONSIBILITY
Access to the unused fields shared among landowners and *Suisha* members. That opened other accesses to subsidy, socio- ecological networks, culture and knowledge for project committee members, and regional and local governments, the customers, and surrounding nature, e.g. birds	Use of the fields and produced *soba* shared among *Suisha* members, agroecosystems, public officers, and other domestic *soba* producers. The use was negotiated with families, landowners, the local government, and other community members, and arranged in relation to the climate, agroecology, ageing bodies	Benefits shared among *Suisha* members, their family members, community members, governments, customers, surrounding nature. The benefits included enhanced agroecosystem, income opportunities, and high-valued *soba* products	Caring practices shared among *Suisha* members with *soba* plant, state actors, local officers, landowners. The caring relationships included soil, and customers, agroecosystem, and food knowledge and culture	Responsibilities shared by the networks of *Suisha* members, their family members, landowners, local officers, customers. The responsible networks included *soba*, soil, and agroecosystems. The network can be transformed with other actors while maintaining the ethical responsibilities

Table 2 *Susihsa*'s five dimensions of *soba* commoning.

expanding *benefits*, *caring* for and assuming *responsibility* more collectively.

ACCESS

Small-scale marginal rice fields were rapidly abandoned when the state encouraged consolidation and mechanization in agriculture in the 1980s. Widening access to small unused private rice fields among *Suisha* members through *soba* cultivation was inadvertently supported by state policy whose purpose was to consolidate independent small-scale productions. To secure access to unused land, *Suisha* members collectively negotiated with community project committee members, rice field owners, and local and regional governments. In the beginning, *Suisha* members faced difficulties making progress in their negotiations due to their gender and their related lack of business experience. They, therefore, made arrangements with well-regarded male members of the respected community revitalization committee to negotiate on their behalf with male landowners for access to unused rice fields. This gendered strategy is similar to that used by Mexican women in a cooperative who successfully got their husbands to secure political support from the male local authority for their business (Sato & Alarcón, 2019). In both Mexican and *Suisha* cases new gendered ethical subjectivities emerged that were key in widening shared access that facilitated transformations of socio-ecological relationships via commoning *soba*.

Suisha members used not only gendered strategies to share access to private rice fields but also relationships through subsidies, community networks, skill-up training, and knowledge for their business' sake. A female member said, "'Everyone' was trying as hard as they could, including municipal officers who came to help our practices" (emphasis added). Handmade *soba* noodles using their own flour served at their restaurant opened access to new customers from urban areas. Another female member proudly wrote in a local newspaper post that a key ingredient of the success of their local business was the hand cultivation, processing, and preparation of *soba* noodles which were thought to "add value" to *Suisha* members' "passion, power, and energy" that they cultivated (Kaneta, 1992). She further wrote that "We learned a lot from our customers and through our communication with them we have built trust and compassion that have led to long-term relationships with them" (Kaneta, 1992). In affectively relating themselves to the customers, *Suisha* members became passionate about serving handmade *soba* noodles, which strengthened their *kokorozashi* and resulted in long-term relationships with customers and *soba*. This relational process matches Latour's understanding of "learning to be affected" (2004).

Soba commoning widened shared access to things like agricultural fields, subsidy, socio-ecological networks, culture, and knowledge with humans and more-than-human elements. *Suisha*'s *kokorozashi* does not include all species. Members bar some animals, for example, birds and deer from their agricultural fields, and they protect crops with nets.

USE

Soba commoning involved the collective use of unused rice fields for *soba* cultivation until *soba* cultivation was stopped, which we explain shortly, via continuous interactions with their own aging bodies, families, the local government, and the agroecosystems of *soba* fields. Even after access to the unused private rice fields was secured in a gendered, strategic way, use for *soba* cultivation required further efforts to arrange intensive labor input. Since *Suisha* members, mostly women, were responsible for household activities, such as managing the family farm, housework, and childcare, they had to carefully manage their time allocation. To make things work, they deployed a shift work schedule that flexibly responded to each member's availability and accounted for seasonal obligations (e.g., planting and harvesting) and emergent household obligations (e.g., funeral and sickness among family members) household obligations. Also, ability to contribute to *Suisha* activities depended strongly on the degree of supportive understanding of their involvement with *Suisha* by other household members, particularly mothers or fathers-in-law, as these family members were needed to backfill the time they spent working at *Suisha*. Furthermore, food production facilities remain an important more-than-human element of the use for *soba* commoning. To set up their *soba* processing facilities, *Suisha* members negotiated the right to use subsidies with local officers and community members. When negotiating with the board members of the community revitalization project and local officers, they, adopting a framing that would be acceptable on neoliberal terms, argued that *soba* processing facilities would contribute to productive agriculture by enhancing the local agricultural value chain.

Despite the efforts of all the negotiations and arrangements, the productivity of *soba* cultivation declined after the first year. On top of the intensive labor faced by elderly women, *soba* cultivation was challenged by climatic events such as typhoons, damaging *soba* yield, and inhibiting *soba* commoning. After an intense two years of work, *Suisha* members started reducing the scale of *soba* cultivation, which resulted in the discontinuation of certain socio-ecological relationships with *soba* as a plant, associated agroecosystems, and some of the private landowners who rented their unused agricultural

fields. However, an ethical decision was made by *Suisha* members to purchase and use domestically grown *soba* for making handmade *soba* noodles, manifesting *kokorozashi* to continue producing handmade *soba* noodles from buckwheat grown under conditions they recognize as ethical. Rather than purchase cheaper imported *soba,* they chose to support domestic producers in times of economic stress. These choices, which look far beyond economic gain, are an aspect of their postcapitalist *kokorozashi*.

This adjustment released the labor engaged in growing buckwheat and enabled *Suisha* members to extend shared use of existing resources (e.g., knowledge, cultural heritage, and *soba* facilities) by organizing new *soba* practices, such as farming and cooking workshops, even after they stopped *soba* cultivation and continuously produce socio-ecological relationships with different humans (e.g., domestic *soba* producers and customers who participate in *soba* workshops) and more-than-human elements (e.g., small-scale agricultural fields for *soba* farming workshops and purchased *soba*). *Suisha* changed their *Soba* commoning in a manner that better fit both local conditions and aging bodies while maintaining the trust and passion necessary to sustain the long-term affective relationships they have cultivated. Nevertheless, as with deer and birds, inclusion was selective.

BENEFIT

Soba commoning distributed benefits to a wide range of humans and more-than-human elements, which include individual and market-based concerns, but beyond them: farmlands, whose agroecosystems were restored through ecological farming; *Suisha* members and their family members, who profited from the *soba* business; landowners, who had actively in-use farmlands without paying others for labor or toiling away; customers, who enjoyed handmade *soba* noodles using self-cultivated or domestically grown *soba*; and governments, who met their objective of the productive use of abandoned farmlands for rural revitalization and women's empowerment.

Even if *soba* commoning as a process continues, some benefits associated with *soba* cultivation were lost when *soba* cultivation was stopped. To this day, members frequently lament the necessity: "it is a pity that we were not able to continue *soba* cultivation. I sometimes wonder 'what if' were we still able to cultivate *soba*" (*Suisha* member). Their opinions coincide with recent challenges of decreasing customers, declining profits, and continuous aging and depopulation of their communities. What has emerged here is a binary distinction based on complex emotional and ethical relations. Within this binary *soba* noodles made with self-cultivated *soba* flour are better, so they generated more benefits and well-being for communities. *Soba* made with non-locally produced *soba* flour is not as good, so it generates fewer benefits and well-being. *Suisha* members make this distinction knowing that their aging bodies and the *soba* growing conditions can no longer endure the heavy corporeal and emotional burdens of *soba* cultivation. These burdens in addition to the normal pressures facilitated the discontinuation of *soba* cultivation, which can be seen as "uncommoning" and an "anesthetization" of the commons (Miller, 2019; p. 190). The binary construction made through these uncommoning functions to "anesthetize" *Suisha*'s relationships with certain natural resources, farming practices, and social networks. Furthermore, formation of this binary created the emotional burden of an impossible desire to overcome the challenges and continue growing *soba*.

The benefits recognized through the postcapitalist frame used in this study were produced *through* continuous negotiations and arrangements with emerging actors and more-than-human elements which together constitute *Suisha* members' *kokorozashi*. In addition to sensitivity to benefits that fall outside neoliberal market-centric approaches, the postcapitalist frame we used abled us to see the corporeal and emotional suffering of *Suisha* members. State narratives, and some existing studies, construct rural businesswomen as altruistic saviors. These tropes have rarely reported on the suffering of these women. Existing studies in and out of Japan (Elmhirst & Darmastuti, 2015; Sato & Alarcón, 2019; Tsuru, 2007) have found women's tendency to self-sacrifice by taking on an increased burden to mitigate negative impacts on others and to ensure collective well-being (Fujii, 2011; Fujimoto, 2004; Hara-Fukuyo & Ôchi, 2012; Watanabe, 2009). The very virtues of altruism and self-sacrifice that are celebrated in state narratives and in some studies, as indicated by members' reaction to ceasing cultivation of *soba* made visible in our study and could both exacerbate gender inequalities and reduce collective well-being.

CARE

When growing *soba*, *Suisha* members communally and collaboratively took care of 1.5 ha of unused land, previously used for rice farming. Caring for these fields as commons required a diversity of socio-ecological relationships including *soba* as a crop, local governments, local officers, landowners, soil, agroecosystems, food knowledge and culture, regional climate, and customers. According to customary knowledge of farming in the region, *soba* develops seeds 75 days after they are sown. Although *soba* can grow on poor land, the soil in the unused rice fields was very wet and required specific care in each phase: preparing the soil, planting, weeding, sowing, harvesting, threshing, and milling. Once blooming,

soba is vulnerable to moisture that prevents it from fully developing seeds. The crop planted by *Suisha* members bloomed during typhoon season, creating serious problems with unstable, declining yields. For better treatment in this discouraging condition, *Suisha* members reached out to male community members and the municipal farming support engineers to learn technical farming knowledge. These communal and collaborative practices (Mitsumata et al., 2010a, 2010b) are care for the precarity confronted by their commons. The relational care practices pursued were needed for *soba* commoning to respond to the precarious conditions because *Suisha* members aging bodies could barely perform the required strenuous physical labor and the time it took came at the expense of other obligations within their households.

Soba commoning illustrates that care needs to attend to specific, and locally and contextually different aspects of commons to produce not only *soba* but also affective human and more-than-human relationships that constitute a *soba* commoning community. As stated by a *Suisha* member: "*soba* did not grow as we expected, and we were upset and exhausted." This bitter feeling derived from failure and unrewarded enormous efforts to meet the conditions required for the *kokorozashi* that would come with serving handmade *soba* noodles using self-cultivated *soba* flour to customers. Instead of focusing on only *soba*, they started small-scale farming for seasonal crops and demonstration size plots of *soba* next to their restaurant. Since this farming did not focus on the yields, *Suisha* members felt less pressure. *Suisha* also started organizing workshops for customers where they would learn seasonal *soba* farming activities throughout the growing season and how to make *soba* noodles from *soba* flour. For those workshops, semi-retired members, who used to cultivate *soba* and produce the noodles, were called to lead the events and share their knowledge. These workshops made good use of the existing relationships with more-than-human elements, such as the unused agricultural fields and traditional knowledge and skills. Additionally, affording frail but knowledgeable semi-retired members an avenue of service within their physical capacity that allowed urban customers to learn about *soba* farming and cooking. These *soba* activities enhance socio-ecological relationships across different generations including retired and part-time original members, and newly joined members and urban customers. Being able to start *soba* cultivation again, even at a smaller scale, and form new relationships with customers through *soba* workshops satisfies *kokorozashi* and accommodates their decline in physical ability.

Recently emerged commoning activities illustrate *Suisha*'s contributions through care practices to the maintaining *soba* commons, the production of livelihoods, and collective well-being. One senior *Suisha* member, who currently works part-time and sometimes facilitates *soba* workshops, stated: "I am still coming to work here because I do not want to see *Suisha* discontinued. We really worked so hard to get this far." In *Suisha,* members found paths that enabled them to cultivate ethical subjectivities that consider diverse interdependencies between humans and more-than-human elements in manners so as to overcome socio-ecological challenges as a shared matter in aging and depopulating rural context (Bollier & Helfrich, 2015; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Linebaugh, 2008; Miller, 2019; Sato & Alarcón, 2019). These care practices are affected by power dynamics beyond the well-researched capitalist markets and neoliberal governance and they involve practices of inclusion (e.g., domestic *soba*, new customers, semi-retired members) and exclusion (e.g., *soba* cultivation, imported *soba*, birds and deer). While they do support the creation of ethical subjectivities that conform to popular constructions of caring rural women in the *kokorozashi* business, as made visible through our study, these practices also produce often invisible negative aspects that are often invisible, such as women's self-sacrifice and emotional suffering involved in caring.

RESPONSIBILITY

Suisha members assumed responsibilities for sustaining livelihoods and promoting collective well-being through widening limited responsibilities around commons. Through *soba* commoning, they enhanced networks with other people, such as family members, private ricefield landowners, local officers and customers, and non-human elements, such as *soba*, agroecosystems, regional climate, subsidies, cultural heritage, and facilities. By doing so, *Suisha* members widened private landowners' limited responsibility over unused rice fields and reinforced *Suisha*'s relational socio-ecological networks. Whereas discontinuing *soba* cultivation inevitably removed some responsibility from certain actors and more-than-human elements, such as private landowners and self-cultivated *soba*, this discontinuation opened up new possibilities for new actors, for example domestic *soba* producers from whom *Suisha* now buy materials and frail, semi-retired members who occasionally facilitate *soba* workshops.

Suisha members do not always take responsibility in the way they would like. One member at a monthly meeting criticized tightening state food labeling regulations and expressed their concerns about the increasing burden on handcrafted small-scale productions when they are trying to be responsible for their business according to the framework imposed by the state authority. Due to their business format, how *Suisha* members produce food

can vary day to day and require improvisation, which may not comply with legislative food regulations. Their frustration was derived from the gap between their sense of responsibility and state authority, expressed in the following statement made by a member at the meeting, "there is no personal responsibility in Japan." She meant that the state makes rules for everything, which leaves little room for them to engage in their *soba* practices, such as making *soba* noodles handmade by elderly women using traditional knowledge and locally sourced ingredients, in ways that they think as "ethical" based on their *kokorozashi*. *Suisha* both appropriates and reappropriates benefits from neoliberal state governance to continue their business, while also experiencing restrictions and "life without the promise of stability" (Tsing, 2015, p. 2). Although affective socio-ecological relationships cultivated the *kokorozashi* and enabled *Suisha* members to continuously assume responsibility, those relationships delimited situated ethical arrangements and negotiations as well as subjectivities they wished to enact.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how relationships among commons, subjectivities and more-than-human elements around *soba* as part of *Suisha* are ethically negotiated and arranged in the continuous production of collective well-being with an eye on intersecting humans and more-than-human elements using a postcapitalist feminist political ecology's approach to commoning. Our attention to five dimensions of *Suisha*'s *soba* commoning – *access, use, benefit, care,* and *responsibility* (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) – allowed us to see *Suisha* members enacting ethical subjectivities to negotiate and make arrangements over *soba* commons and produce a *soba* commoning community based on the affective socio-ecological relationships with diverse actors and more-than-human elements. *Suisha* members continuously produce collective well-being by shifting strategies in ethical negotiations with diverse actors, across different generations and from different locations, and more-than-human elements, including gender, aging bodies and rurality. *Suisha* members maintained the same, forged new and uncommoned old relationships with human and more-than-human elements in different forms throughout its life course to continue to produce collective well-being. To be sure, *Suisha*'s *kokorozashi* does not exist prior to their actions and without strain on their aging bodies. Their *kokorozashi* continuously evolves and emerges in relation to contingent and ambivalent intersecting political, economic, social, ecological and corporeal processes. As original members have retired, new members have joined despite the community (i.e., Kuma) aging and depopulating. We observe that the *kokorozashi*, albeit expressed in different practices, has been embodied and is enacted by current members. That is, *Suisha*'s *kokorozashi* was formed and transformed in the relational process of "learning to be affected" (Latour, 2004). Their *kokorozashi,* formed and transformed by affective relationships with humans and more-than-humans in a specific socio-ecological context over time, supports the transformative processes of *soba* commoning (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013; Singh, 2017; Tsing, 2015).

The feminist political ecology's approach to commoning used in this study has allowed us to complement existing Japanese rural studies on gender, women's business and commons, by focusing on the process of how commons, ethical subjectivities and more-than-human communities emerge from negotiations and arrangements made by diverse socio-ecological relationships and by allowing us to see the emergence of commons as contingent and ambivalent affective socio-ecological processes that are shaped by and shape power dynamics. We chose to highlight four dimensions that are rarely represented in existing state and academic understandings because they shape the continuous production of livelihoods and collective well-being that motivates these studies. First, our attention to ethical negotiations and arrangements within more-than-human relationships that constitute, in part, commoning goes beyond the power of capitalist markets, neoliberal governance, and local communities. This speaks to specific postcapitalist and more-than-human relationships that, recognized in the term *kokorozashi,* contribute to the continuous production of collective well-being. Second, our approach shows that commoning entails inclusion and exclusion (Nightingale, 2019) through contingent and ambivalent socio-ecological processes, some of which entail more-than-human elements in their dynamics involving climate events, aging, and corporeality. Third, while many studies naturalize the collaboration based on a public-private division in support of state narratives for community revitalization, our approach permits us to see how *soba* commoning cuts across this divide and is interdependent with *Suisha* members' household relationships. For members to successfully perform the subjectivities that produce economic results, they must make efforts to maintain appropriate relationships and flexibility in their households as both are key in shaping their collective well-being. Fourth, although power shapes the construction of rural women as potential altruistic saviors and of the

neoliberal institutions for natural resource management as rational in the favor of the state narratives and some existing studies, our approach toward intersecting powers made visible ambivalence, exclusions, and suffering. Our postcapitalist feminist political ecology approach to commoning complicates the essentialized construction of rural women, and diverse human and socio-ecological relationships. Our disruption of these analytic and programmatic conveniences creates a more nuanced understanding within which it may be possible to better support women's efforts to sustain rural livelihoods based on their *kokorozashi* in a manner that continuously strengthens the rural contexts these policies wish to benefit.

NOTES

1 The national aging rate was 38.5% as of 2015 (Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries, 2020).

2 *Iriai*, "common access lands" (McKean & Cox, 1982, p. 66) in Japanese, is a collective resource management system in traditional Japanese villages.

3 It was followed by the Law on Special Measures for Activation of Depopulated Area in 2000 and the Act on Special Measures for Promotion for Independence for Underpopulated Areas in 2014.

4 Major local women's groups in rural areas include *seikatsu-kaizen* (life improvement) groups, *fujin-kai* (women's association), and JA *fujin-bu* (women's auxiliary in Japan Agricultural Cooperatives).

5 Also, see studies that were conducted outside Japan, for example, Elmhirst, Siscawati, Basnett, and Ekowati (2017); Lanz, Prügl, and Gerber (2020).

6 The group size was 29 (28 women and one man) in 1987 and 21 members (20 women and one man) in January 2022. Only one woman original member is still actively working, and some others work part-time or in management.

7 There was one man in 1987 and a different man who newly joined as of January 2022.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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