



Co-operative Practices in Championing Owen's Legacy in Contemporary Japan

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Robert Owen's ideas arrived in the Far East in the late nineteenth century when Japan abandoned its "closed-door" policy. Owen's views became widely known through numerous translations and publications after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. His ideas have proven influential particularly in the areas of childcare, social welfare, management practice and social movements although his influence on communal life has been limited. Owen has often been viewed negatively as a utopian socialist by Marxists but he has inspired co-operative leaders including Dr Toyohiko Kagawa. Owen has been studied by researchers of social philosophy including Professors Shigeru Goto and Chushichi Tsuzuku. Today, Hitotsubashi University and Meiji University in Tokyo hold the Owen Collection and the Owen Library, respectively. The Robert Owen Association of Japan was set up by concerned researchers and co-operative practitioners in 1958, commemorating the centenary of Owen's death. It is active in promoting scholarship on Robert Owen and worldwide co-operative history through regular symposia and publications in both English and Japanese. The story of the Rochdale Pioneers remains popular even today and is often revisited by academic essays, books, comics, and films while a replica of Rochdale's Toad Lane Museum was built by Co-op Kobe.

Introduction

Robert Owen has been commonly regarded as the father of the co-operative movement in Britain and as the inspiration for co-operative ventures worldwide. Although Owen's ideas about co-operative practice were uneven, Owenism exercised a major influence on the co-operative movement. Many Owenites were active in various producer and consumer co-operatives, whilst the Rochdale Pioneers, renowned for having popularised the dividend, and considered the first modern co-operators in history, were also keen Owenites (Siméon, 2021). The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society incorporated many, though not all of Owen's ideas. Later, its successful practices were crystallised into the Rochdale Principles that became the international norm for the worldwide co-operative movement. Today, co-operative principles are enshrined in the ICA Statement on the Co-operative Identity, putting the Rochdale Pioneers as one of the founders of the co-operative movement.

Robert Owen's ideas arrived in the Far East in the late nineteenth century when Japan abandoned the "closed-door" policy that had operated from 1639 to 1854. Owen became widely known through numerous translations and publications after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. His ideas were influential in the areas of childcare, social welfare, management practice, and social

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movements although his influence on communal life has been limited.¹ Owen has been often viewed negatively as a utopian socialist by Japanese Marxists but he has inspired co-operative leaders such as Toyohiko Kagawa, Sadao Nakabayashi, and Yoshio Takahashi.² Owen has been studied by researchers of social philosophy including Shigeru Goto and Chushichi Tsuzuku. Today, Hitotsubashi University holds the Owen Collection while Meiji University hosts the Owen Library. The Robert Owen Association of Japan (ROA) is active in promoting scholarship on Robert Owen and co-operative history.

This essay begins by introducing the ROA, which constitutes a unique body of scholarship on Owenism and the history of co-operative movement. It then describes how Owen has inspired consumer co-operatives that enrol one in two Japanese households as members. Thirdly, it explores the multipurpose agricultural co-operatives that are championing Owen's legacy of community building while also being among the largest co-operatives in the ICA's World Cooperative Monitor. Overall, Owen's ideas and practices have had a wide-ranging influence on Japan's co-operative practices through the mediation of the Rochdale Pioneers.

The Robert Owen Association

The Robert Owen Association (ROA) was founded by Professor Shigeru Goto and colleagues in 1958 to commemorate the centenary of Owen's death, and received supportive messages from G. D. H. Cole and W. P. Watkins.³ After a period of inactivity it was revived for Owen's bicentenary in 1971 when it hosted the visit of Ms Caroline Dale Owen Baldwin. From time to time it has staged lectures by important scholars including D. E. Pitzer, Johnston Birchall, and Gregory Claeys.

The ROA has more than seventy individual members (researchers and practitioners) and twenty corporate members (co-operative federations). Its secretariat was originally located in the Ie-no-Hikari Association, a publisher of agricultural co-operatives, and moved to the Consumer Co-operative Institute of Japan in the 1990s. The ROA holds quarterly study meetings on the idea and practices of Robert Owen, his followers and co-operatives, and has published its *Annals* since 1975. A recent issue includes the papers and comments presented at the symposium commemorating the 250th anniversary "From Utopia to Co-operative Idea" held on 30 October 2021.

The ROA has edited volumes in both Japanese and English containing essays on Owen's ideas and on co-operative history. Japanese publications include *Collection of essays on Robert Owen* (1971), *Robert Owen and the co-operative movement* (1986), and a booklet to mark the ROA's jubilee in 2008. There are two English publications: *Robert Owen and the world of co-operation* (1992) edited by Chushichi Tsuzuki,⁴ commemorating the ICA Tokyo Congress, which features essays by scholars including Gregory Claeys, Naobumi Hijikata, Royden Harrison, J. F. C. Harrison, Atsushi Shirai, and the present author. In 2005 Professor Tsuzuki, along with the present author and Naobumi Hijikata, edited *The emergence of global citizenship: Utopian ideas, co-operative movements and the third sector*. This includes essays by Claeys, Ian Donnachie, John Langdon, Rita Rhodes, Roger Spear, and Johnston Birchall.

The Influence of Owen and the Rochdale Pioneers on Consumer Co-operatives

Japanese consumer co-operatives can trace their history to the late nineteenth century. After the Meiji Restoration, knowledge of consumer co-operatives was imported along with modern economics. In 1878, Takeyoshi Baba published an article on the establishment of co-operative shops in the newspaper *Yubin Hochi*, introducing the Rochdale Pioneers Society. The first co-operative shops based on the Rochdale model were set up in Tokyo, Osaka, and Kobe in 1879-80. These pioneering co-operatives were supported by elites such as bureaucrats,

business and media leaders, but they disappeared after a few years owing to the lack of wider social investment. During industrialisation, emerging trade unions in ironworks and railways organised *kyodoten* (co-operative shops) as their subsidiaries, while benevolent owners of factories and mines encouraged workplace co-operatives. At the turn of the century civil servants and teachers organised some co-operatives. By 1920, three types of consumer co-operatives had emerged: worker-oriented co-operatives associated with the radical labour movement; co-operatives for employees attached to companies or factories; and citizen co-operatives organised by the middle-classes. Each stream was rooted in distinct ideologies: Marxism-Leninism, paternalism-conservatism, and liberalism. These co-operatives were generally small and relatively short-lived.

In the wake of 'Taisho democracy', a liberal and democratic trend across the political, economic, and cultural fields in Japan in the interwar period (1910s to 1920s under the reign of Emperor Taisho), citizen co-operatives, often encouraged by local authorities, were set up to cope with inflation. *Katei Kobai Kumiai* (Family Consumer Co-operative) founded in Tokyo in 1919 was chaired by Sakuzo Yoshino, a proponent of *Minponshugi* (politics of the people) and grew to become the largest co-operative with 20,000 members by 1941. Kobe Co-operative and Nada Co-operative were established under the influence of the Christian social reformer Toyohiko Kagawa and the business leader Zenji Nasu in 1921. They grew to become major co-operatives in Kobe and (from 1924) introduced women's groups called *kateikai* (household associations) aiming to support co-operative activities and enhance women's consciousness following the model of the British Co-operative Women's Guilds. Other citizen co-operatives based on the Rochdale model were set up in Osaka and Kyoto in this period while a number of student consumer co-operatives were set up in Tokyo and Kyoto. Outside Japan, the South Manchuria Railway Company, a spearhead of Japanese colonial rule in north-eastern China, helped to set up a consumer co-operative for its employees in 1919. These co-operatives operated retail shops or *goyoukiki* home delivery (Kurimoto, 2017).⁵

After the Second World War, the 1948 Consumer Co-operatives Act was enacted separately from other co-operative legislation. It introduced major impediments to the development of co-operatives: the complete prohibition of non-member trade, the limitation of operational areas within prefectures, and the elimination of business credit. The complete ban of non-member trade was imposed owing to the anti-co-operative campaigns of small retailers who wished to restrict consumer co-operatives for political and economic reasons. Co-operatives responded by enrolling all customers as members and raising members' share investment.

Just after the war, consumer co-operatives had been set up in *chonaikai* (neighbourhood associations) and workplaces to cope with the serious shortage of food. These 'buying clubs' mushroomed to over 6,000 co-operatives by 1947. However, they were short-lived and dissolved when the food distribution system was rebuilt. The Japanese Consumer Co-operative Union (JCCU) was set up in 1951 and collaborated with trade unions in setting up worker-oriented co-operatives such as *Rokin* (labour banks), *Rosai* (insurance co-operatives), and *chiiki kinrosha seikyo* (community-based worker-owned consumer co-operatives) to enhance workers' welfare. *Rokin* and *Rosai* established themselves as union-based enterprises while *chiiki kinrosha seikyo* had an instant success that triggered anti-co-operative campaigns before collapsing with the advent of the supermarket.

In the 1960s and 1970s massive consumer campaigns were organised against food additives, controlled prices, misleading labelling, water pollution, and skin eczema caused by detergent, air pollution causing asthma, and so on. Housewives inspired by this campaign started the 10-yen milk movement by organising buying clubs to secure unadulterated pure milk for their families, particularly children. They formed *Han* groups for ordering and receiving milk.⁶ From these buying clubs so-called citizen's co-operatives emerged from the mid-1960s with various backgrounds: university co-operatives assisted housewives to create and run consumer co-operatives by providing staff and expertise in Sapporo, Saitama, Nagoya, and Kyoto, while trade unions helped to organise Seikatsu Club Co-operatives in Tokyo and Yokohama. The existing co-operatives also joined them: Nada and Kobe co-operatives merged into Nada-Kobe Co-operative in 1962 to compete with the supermarket chains (renamed as Co-op Kobe in

1991) and shifted from *goyoukiki* to joint buying in 1977, while the labour-oriented Yokohama Co-operative adopted *Han* groups in the 1960s and joined with other co-operatives to create Kanagawa Co-operative in 1975 (renamed Co-op Kanagawa in 1989). Until 1985, citizen co-operatives were operating in all the prefectural capitals. Thus, the Japanese consumer co-operative model was developed with housewives' involvement, home delivery to *Han* group (joint buying), and a social movement dimension. Inspired by the UK Co-operative Union's *Regional Plan* of 1968, the JCCU launched the Regional Policy which intended to break the threshold of one per cent market share for co-operatives by creating "a core co-operative" in each prefecture. However, some co-operatives faced serious financial problems in the course of expansion. JCCU's own project to create a powerful Tokyo co-operative and set up an integrated buying department soon failed owing to mismanagement, while Co-op Sapporo faced a severe cash flow problem in implementing its rapid expansion strategy and had to ask for financial help from the JCCU in 1969-70. In 1970, the JCCU Congress in Fukushima adopted a special resolution pledging to make a paradigm shift from management-driven rapid expansion to member-based steady development. This resolution, initiated by President Sadao Nakabayashi, responded to the financial crisis by laying down a policy based on co-operative values and principles that prioritised membership as a principle. This urged co-operatives to promote member participation and joint buying.⁷

Consumer co-operatives have educated members and employees on the subjects of Robert Owen and the Rochdale Pioneers through induction courses, lectures, leaflets, and manga. The translations of George Jacob Holyoake's 1893 *The history of the Rochdale Pioneers* (in 1968) and of Johnston Birchall's 1994 *Co-op, the people's business* (in 1996) and 1997 *The international co-operative movement* (in 1999) have played an important role. Keiko Miyake's *Rainbow over Rochdale* (1979) was a comic strip for children telling the history of the Rochdale Pioneers while Yasutaro Tomosada's *The Rochdale story* (1994) was based on his visits to Rochdale.⁸ The JCCU made the Co-operative Wholesale Society's film *Men of Rochdale* available in sub-titled and DVD format for educational purpose. And JCCU President Nalabayashi gave moral and organisational support to the ROA to promote co-operative education based on the movement's values and principles.

The History Museum was opened in 1991 as a part of the Co-op College in Kobe commemorating Co-op Kobe's 70th anniversary.⁹ It is a replica of the Toad Lane Museum, and contains exhibitions of co-operative history, the archives of Toyohiko Kagawa, and co-operatives' activities to help victims of the Kobe Earthquake in 1995. A plaque commemorating the Kobe Earthquake was unveiled at the CRS head office in Rochdale.¹⁰ Co-op Kobe celebrated its centenary in 2021 (Kurimoto, 2021).

Community Building of Agricultural Co-operatives as Owen's Legacy

Modern Japanese agricultural co-operatives, modelled after the German Raiffeisen co-operatives, originated in the early twentieth century under the Industrial Co-operative Act of 1900. While this Act regulated all types of co-operatives including consumer and credit co-operatives in urban areas, its main objective was to develop agricultural co-operatives to combat rural usury by money lenders. Co-operatives were allowed to operate four types of businesses of marketing, supply, credit, and production (later replaced by services) in 1906 and then rural multipurpose co-operatives with concurrent operations became the dominant form of the Japanese agricultural co-operatives (JAs). They were merged with *nokai* to set up the agricultural societies as a war mobilising organ in 1943.¹¹

After the Japanese surrender, the Allied Forces introduced a radical economic transformation through agrarian reform in 1946 and the Anti-Monopoly Act of 1947 to dismantle the landlord and *zaibatsu* system as pillars of militarism, while legitimising trade unions by the Trade Unions Act of 1949. The Agricultural Co-operatives Act (ACA) of 1947 cemented the effects of agrarian reform while the agricultural societies were transformed into agricultural co-operatives overnight. The government supported JAs to increase food production and promoted the rationalisation and consolidation of JAs. In this process, the top-down approach from the ministry was inherited

and the Japanese agricultural co-operative model was developed. Chikuji Fujitani pointed to the “trihedral complex” composed of government agency, pressure group, and co-operative or, as Takaaki Otawara put it, “institutionalised co-operatives” made of all farmers’ affiliation, the *keitou* system and multipurpose co-operatives. It is widely recognised that JAs formed an “agricultural policy triangle” with the Ministry of Agriculture and the Liberal Democratic Party.

The ACA provides for two types of membership: fully-fledged members (farmers) and associated members (non-farmers). The former rely on supply and marketing, credit and insurance, and other services, while the latter use mainly credit and insurance, food retailing, and hospital services. JAs have sought to meet a variety of needs through diversified services while members’ interests became more heterogeneous. At the same time, JAs have posited the *sonraku* as a basic organisation and promoted community farming to solve the problems associated with the aging/retiring of farmers while urbanisation made the rural population more mixed in terms of settlements and source of income.¹³ JAs sought to engage with local community development in addition to enhancing industrial competitiveness, promoting a slogan of *chisan chisho* (consuming locally grown produce) aiming at a kind of local sufficiency.

Alex Laidlaw took the JA as a model of co-operative community:

It provides farming inputs and markets the agricultural product; it is a thrift and credit organisation, an insurance agency, a center for consumer supplies; it provides medical services and hospital care in some places; it has an extension and field services for farmers and a community center for cultural activities. In short, this kind of co-operative embraces as broad a range of economic and social services as possible. Life for the rural people and the whole community would be entirely different without such a co-operative (Laidlaw, 1981, p. 66).

JAs became an indispensable infrastructure for the rural population. Under the changing socio-economic situation, such a model of comprehensive services currently faces market competition and criticism from the State, but JAs are determined to uphold a co-operative community in one form or another.

However, the multipurpose co-operative model faces several challenges. JAs have had difficulties in adapting to a more heterogeneous internal membership and a more external competitive environment. Associate membership increased year by year and from 2010 outnumbered full members, while losses in the supply and marketing businesses have been compensated by profits generated by financial businesses in recent decades. There is growing pressure from the government and banks to separate these functions to place JAs on a level playing field, and there are also proposals to limit the use of associate members. The ACA (as amended in 2015) urged JAs to increase their competitiveness in the supply and marketing businesses, while the apex organisation JA Zenchu (central union) was transformed from a government-designated special corporation to a general incorporated association. In 2021, the JA Group adopted a vision aimed at accomplishing sustainable agriculture, while creating enriched and liveable communities.

Conclusion

Robert Owen has been repeatedly discovered and studied in Japan. Co-operative leaders have been inspired by Owen’s ideas and the Rochdale Pioneers’ practices. Owen’s ideas are essential for anyone concerned with economic and social reforms based on principles of justice, and are relevant to the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Robert Owen Association has studied and disseminated Owen’s ideas and the worldwide co-operative movement’s practices. The ROA’s scholarship directly connects with Owen and his followers. The leaders of Japanese consumer co-operatives have been often inspired by Owen’s idealism and the Rochdale Pioneers’ pragmatism, while agricultural co-operatives have built a model of co-operative community to serve the comprehensive needs of rural populations. Thus, the practices of millions of contemporary co-operators are indirectly influenced by Owen’s ideas and the achievement of the Rochdale Pioneers.

The Author

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Notes

- 1 Saneatsu Mushanokoji, a writer, created New Village in 1938, while Miyozo Yamagishi, an agriculturalist, initiated Yamagishism in 1953. These rural communes could not attract a sustainable number of followers.
- 2 Toyohiko Kagawa is a renowned Christian social reformer often seen as a father of the co-operative movement in Japan. Sadao Nakabayashi was the 4th President of the Japanese Consumer Co-operative Union (JCCU), while Yoshio Takahashi served as CEO of the Ie-no-Hikari Association, a publisher of agricultural co-operatives.
- 3 Shigeru Goto was Professor at Meiji University and a pioneer of Japanese Robert Owen studies. He was Chair of ROA and taught the former emperor as a court poet.
- 4 Chushichi Tsuzuki, a Japan Academy prize winner, was Professor at Hitotsubashi University. He succeeded Shigeru Goto as Chair of ROA.
- 5 *Goyoukiki* is the on-demand home delivery system in which salespeople visit individual houses to receive and deliver orders. It was largely replaced by modern retail formats but remained popular in rice and liquor retailing.
- 6 *Han* groups were organised by several members living in the neighbourhood originally to receive information from the co-operative. Later they became the points of ordering and receiving delivery.
- 7 It is argued that the Fukushima resolution had a negative impact on the development of store operations.
- 8 Keiko Miyake was a writer of children's literature and a member of ROA. Yasutaro Tomosada served Co-op Kobe and JCCU as an executive director.
- 9 Co-op Kobe provides education and training for its own members/employees and shares its expertise among leading consumer co-operatives in Japan.
- 10 Co-op Kobe organised a large consumer co-operatives' symposium with Konsum Stockholm and Co-op Dortmund, later joined by the CRS.
- 11 *Nokai* were public organisations with mandatory membership which disseminated technical knowledge of agriculture.
- 12 *Keitou* is a pyramidal organisation consisting of primary, secondary and tertiary levels corresponding to the administrative system of municipality, prefecture and national governments.
- 13 *Sonraku* is a naturally clustered village, or hamlet, composed of dozens of households often operating as a place of communal work for irrigation, thatching, harvesting, and so on. The Sonraku may form the constituency to elect delegates, the locus for communication between co-operatives and members, the channel of delivering newsletters, and the means of promoting JA's business.

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