

International Agribusiness Studies (Spring/Summer 2025)

Instructor: Shuji HISANO (Professor, Graduate School of Economics, Kyoto University)

- Target year: 1st year students or above
- Number of credits: 2 credits
- Year/Semester: 2025 | in the spring/summer semester
- Days/Periods: 13:30-16:30 on alternate Mondays
- Class style: Lecture (reading seminar)
- Language of instruction: English

Overview and purpose of the course:

This course is designed also for a group of students who are supervised by the instructor and therefore continuously attend the course over several years. A consistent and overarching theme of this course is ***how to investigate and understand the power of business as a political actor***, especially the role of multinational corporations vis-à-vis the role of states and civil society actors.

In 2019 and 2020, this course provided a comprehensive analysis of social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues surrounding specific agricultural products along the agri-food value chains (*a global flow of food from upstream to downstream across borders*). In 2021, we turned our attention to one of the ongoing structural processes with profound influences on agri-food systems and rural economies around the world: *financialisation*.

In 2022, we read together articles on *the political economy of healthy and sustainable food systems* published in the International Journal of Health Policy and Management as a special issue on the Political Economy of Food Systems. They include several systemic review articles using various methods of literature search, review, and analysis, while some others use narrative review methods to analyse policy-making and governance processes. Through reading these articles, we learned how to conduct qualitative literature reviews and narrative analyses as well.

In 2023, we again turned our eyes to *a rather broader framework, or research agenda*, to explore the pressing issues that confront food systems and the emerging responses to them: from the contribution of food production to climate breakdown to the emergence of regionalised and regenerative food systems; from the contribution of alternative proteins in dietary change to the potential of digital agriculture in sustainability transition; from the persistence of food poverty to the development of urban food systems; etc.

In 2024, our focus was on *emerging agri-food technological innovations: datafication of agriculture*, such as precision agriculture, alternative proteins, and gene editing, especially attending to historical, political-economic, and cultural-ideational contexts in which novel technologies (and the scientific knowledge supporting and embodied in these particular technical forms) are designed, produced, and applied. Our interest was not only in the contents of technologies and impacts of corporate activities but rather in the power of discourses and narratives surrounding “decontextualised”, “futurism” and “techno-fix” orientation. We looked into power relations within and behind the highly political process of technology development that tends to be obscured and made invisible due to the seeming purity and neutrality of the data, and its “promissory narratives (or imaginaries)”.

What we have kept in mind in our review and discussion over the past years is ***power relations within and behind the process of agri-food business development and transformation***: how powerful business actors are able to exert a direct and indirect influence on the process of international and national policy-making (agenda-setting) and governance of agri-food systems.

Since the topic we tackled last year (i.e. the politics of agritech and foodtech) ongoingly captures a lot of political, academic, and public attention, this year we will be reading a book in the same line of critical studies on ***the rise of apolitical and simplified “technology-fix” solutions***, with its logic (“solutionism”) and trajectories being similar to

those in Silicon Valley. In relation to that, we will also study the power of narratives and the narratives of power, especially on ***how contrasting narratives are socially and epistemologically constructed and associated with theories of change (food systems transformation)***.

Course Goals:

By reading the literature and actively participating in discussions, by the end of this course, you should be able to have a deep understanding, theoretical conceptualisation and critical/reflective insights into the current state of the global food system, the processes and mechanisms of food system governance and the role of powerful political and business actors: how and in what way they are able to exert their influence on food systems governance, including the governance of agri-food technologies; and if and how it is possible to challenge such a hegemonic regime and bring the governance of food systems and the process of knowledge production and applications more democratic and genuinely participatory.

Course schedule and contents:

- [A] Julie Guthman (2024) *The Problem with Solutions: Why Silicon Valley Can't Hack the Future of Food*. University of California Press.
- [B] Molly D. Anderson (2024) *Transforming Food Systems: Narratives of Power*. Routledge.

[Week 1 | April 14] Guidance / A0. Introduction / B1. Why This Book?

[Week 2-3 | April 21] A1. Silicon Valley and the Urge to Make the World a Better Place / A2. Agrifood Solutions before Silicon Valley

[Week 4-5 | May 12] A3. Silicon Valley Bites Off Agriculture and Food / A4. Alternative Protein and the Nothing Burger of the Techno-Fix / A5. Digital Technologies and Plowing Through to the Problem

[Week 6-7 | May 26] A6. Silicon Valley Thinking Comes to the University A7. Big Ideas and Making Silicon Valley-Style Solution Makers / A8. Conclusion: The Pessimism of Solutions and the (Cautious) Optimism of Response

[Week 8-9 | June 9] B2. Do We Really Agree on Food System Problems and Goals? / B3. Significance of Narratives and Their Connections with Theories of Change

[Week 10-11 | June 23] B4. The Value of Food: Commodity or Commons / B5. Mapping Power Flows in Food Systems

[Week 12-13 | July 7] B6. What Drives Food System Transformation toward Regeneration? Narratives that Do Not Require Structural Transformation

[Week 14-15 | July 17] B7. What Drives Food System Transformation toward Regeneration with Structural Changes in Power?

[Week 16 | July 28] B8. Who Will Lead Transformation?

Basic rules in class

- One or two students are assigned to prepare a summary presentation of book chapter(s) or journal papers, including questions, reflections, and some points for discussion
- The summary part of the presentation should not be detailed too much
- Handout (a summary, questions and discussion points) needs to be circulated via email 2-3 days beforehand
- A student who will be assigned to the next class is appointed to be a facilitator, who introduces presentation(s), manages time, collects, and organises questions and points for discussion, and facilitates discussion

- All the participants are required to actively join the discussion
- Anybody can present anything additional but closely relevant to the chapter(s) with or without a handout

Course requirements:

No prerequisite knowledge or skill is required other than English language ability sufficient to interact actively in class.

Evaluation methods and policy:

Grading will be carried out on the basis of active class participation (70%) and assignment presentation (30%).

Textbook, Reference Books, etc:

Readings will be made available through a Cloud system (e.g. Google Drive). The reading list will be shared with the participating students in due time.

Study outside of class (preparation and review):

Participating students will be assigned to read required articles or self-selected articles beforehand. Since classes are very interactive, well-preparation for each class is very important for students to participate in discussions.

Dear GSM students who are interested in International Agribusiness Studies:

Every year we receive a substantial number of GSM students in the guidance class at the beginning of the semester. We are well aware that they are keen to study something about agriculture, food and related industries, though for different reasons. Unfortunately, however, it is usually only a few GSM students who actually register and continue to attend classes throughout the semester. There seem to be the following two reasons, or a kind of gap between expectation and actual offers.

First, as described in the course syllabus, this course provides a critical and comprehensive analysis of social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues surrounding agriculture, food and rural economies: specific agricultural products along the agri-food value chain, the ongoing financialisation of agri-food systems, and the political economy of healthy and sustainable food systems with a focus on power relations in the past semesters. For this line of studies, we need to take multidisciplinary approaches in the social sciences. Rather than economics or management, it opts for political economy and sociology, and also geography and cultural studies in certain contexts. Very qualitative.

Second, this course is designed and offered mainly for research-oriented GSE students (especially those of the International Graduate Programme for East Asia Sustainable Economic Development Studies), and its course format is seminar-based (or “readings” it may be called). This means that, instead of having one-way (or even interactive) lectures, students are assigned to read 2-3 articles or book chapters on the topic, while one or two students are assigned to present a 2–3-page written summary of the readings in each class; based on which students discuss together readings’ main arguments, approaches, limitations or whatever related to the topic.

Therefore, this course and discussion in class are not designed for practical (business/project management) or technical (econometric) purposes at all. If this is not what you expect from the course, you are kindly asked to cancel your provisional registration and look for another course. This suggestion is especially because we will decide who will take care of the summary presentation of which chapter(s) in the first class.

If you still want to join this course, you are most welcome, of course.

International Political Economy of Agriculture (Autumn/Winter 2025)

Instructor: Shuji Hisano

- Target year: 1st year students or above
- Number of credits: 2 credits
- Year/Semester: 2024 | in the autumn/winter semester
- Days/Periods: 13:30-16:30 on alternate Mondays
- Class style: Lecture (reading seminar)
- Language of instruction: English

Overview and purpose of the course:

This course provides a comprehensive and critical view on the development and current state-of-affairs of agriculture and food governance at the global, national, and local levels, by referring to various theoretical frameworks and concepts of international political economy and agri-food sociology and geography, especially with a focus on the unequal power relations between various actors. We will discuss issues and prospects of agriculture and food governance from the perspectives of “sustainable and just development”.

Since this course is designed also for a group of students who are supervised by the instructor and therefore continuously attend the course over several years, it would be better to share the themes of the course in the previous years before introducing the theme in 2025.

In 2021, our focus was on the concept of “food as a commons” which has (re)emerged as a transformative narrative and framing to challenge the mainstream paradigm of food as a commodity, to broaden our imagination to explore and practice the alternative paradigm of food and food systems.

In 2022, we read the Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies together to learn the origins, concepts and methodologies of critical agrarian studies, a field of research that unites scholars from various disciplines concerned with understanding the process of agrarian change: the processes, implications, and limitations of pervasive capitalist penetration into the agricultural sector and rural livelihoods and landscapes. In each 2-period class, we picked up three to four chapters of the Handbook which consists of 72 chapters in total.

In 2023, we turned our eyes to urban food governance as a space and means of transforming food systems globally as well as locally/regionally. Although it is in rural areas where our food is mainly produced, scholarly and policy attention is gradually drawn to urban and city-regions as an important arena for making and implementing food policy. We learnt the histories, concepts, and practices of urban food governance through case studies of plans, policies, and programmes implemented in different contexts.

We have often come across the question of how alternatives emerge and are constructed; and if and in what way they can demonstrate and realise their transformative potential (e.g. challenging and transforming the dominant food regime towards more just and sustainable food systems and bringing about social change at large). Therefore, in 2024, we deepened the understanding, broadened the horizon, and enriched the imaginary of “alternatives and futures” of our agri-food systems through learning diverse practices, theories, and politics around the two most significant concepts of agri-food transformations: alternative food networks (AFNs) and agroecology.

While studying diverse alternative approaches, we have found it necessary to understand and theorise emerging governance processes and mechanisms that involve very diverse actors (including local, everyday actors) and other elements of society (e.g. localised practices, grassroots networks, disruptive norms, innovative ideas) as well as more-than-human others (e.g. complex and multilayered ecosystems). For this purpose, this year we will read together a book about “everyday governance” and “assemblage” perspectives as a means of improving the sustainability of agriculture and food systems.

Course objectives:

Through this course, students will acquire critical and interdisciplinary approaches to social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental issues surrounding agriculture and food, and gain insight into fundamental social science issues such as “structure and agency”, “commodification and alienation”, and “power of discourse”.

Course schedule and contents:

Every year, textbooks used in this course are different, but we use either introductory books with high international recognition for textbooks so that even beginners of agri-food studies or international political economy and sociology can learn effectively, or handbook-style books with theoretically and conceptually elaborated introduction chapter and well-structured chapters that cover most of important issues and problems and include rich case studies. In the past years, we read the following books together:

- [2019] Jason Konefal & Maki Hatanaka, eds., *Twenty Lessons in the Sociology of Food and Agriculture*, Oxford UP, 2019.
- [2020] Jessica Duncan, Michael Carolan & Johannes S.C. Wiskerke, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable and Regenerative Food Systems*, Routledge, 2020.
- [2021] Jose Louis Vivero-Pol, Tomaso Ferrando, Olivier De Schutter & Ugo Mattei, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Food as a Commons*, Routledge, 2018.
- [2022] H. Akram-Lodhi, Kristina Dietz, Bettina Engels and Ben M. McKay, eds., *Handbook of Critical Agrarian Studies*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021.
- [2023] Ana Moragues-Faus, Jill K. Clark, Jane Battersby, Anna Davies, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Urban Food Governance*, Routledge, 2023.
- [2024] Colin Ray Anderson, Janneke Bruil, M. Jahi Chappel, Csilla Kiss, and Michel Patrick Pimbert, *Agroecology Now! Transformations Towards More Just and Sustainable Food Systems*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.

In this semester, we will read the following book.

- **Jérémie Forney, Dana Bentia, Angga Dwiartama. *Everyday Agri-Environmental Governance: The Emergence of Sustainability through Assemblage Thinking*. Routledge, 2024.**

[Week 1 | Oct 6] Guidance and Introduction

[Week 2-3 | Oct 20] 1. Everyday Agri-Environmental Governance and the Assemblage Perspectives

[Week 4-5 | Nov 6] 2. Heterogeneous Governance Assemblages: Mapping the Cases

[Week 6-7 | Nov 17] 3. Unpredictability of Effects in Agri-Environmental Governance

[Week 8-9 | Dec 1] 4. Power, Agency, and Desire in Everyday Governance

[Week 10-11 | Dec 15] 5. Reframing Change in Governance Assemblages: Properties, Capacities, and Basins of Attraction

[Week 12-13 | Jan 5] 6. Governing Emergence Towards the Transformation of Agri-Food Assemblages

[Week 14-15 | Jan 26] Wrap-up Discussion

Basic rules in class

- One or two students are assigned to prepare a summary presentation of book chapter(s) or journal papers, including questions, reflections and some points for discussion

- The summary part of the presentation should not be detailed too much
- Handout (a summary, questions and discussion points) needs to be circulated via email 2-3 days beforehand
- A student who will be assigned to the next class is appointed to be a facilitator, who introduces presentation(s), manages time, collects and organises questions and points for discussion, and facilitates discussion
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Course requirements:

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Evaluation methods and policy:

Grading will be carried out on the basis of active class participation (70%) and assignment presentation/report (30%).

Study outside of class (preparation and review):

Students are required to read the assigned articles and book chapters for each class as well as other relevant reading materials so that they will be able to actively participate in discussions.