

《REPORT》

Rural Land Reform and Agricultural Land Committee in Post War Japan

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I was invited as a speaker for “The Fourth Kyujanggak International Symposium on Korean Studies” held at Seoul National University in Korea during August 25 – 26, 2011. This paper is the English one in which I discussed the Japanese rural land reform on the main topic “Land Reform as East Modernization Project”. The Japanese land reform was regarded as one of the models for other countries as a reform based on the capitalist system, together with the land reform in socialist China. How could such a “revolutionary” reform be carried out so rapidly within the bounds of capitalism? I examined this issue and the historical significance focusing on two key aspects, without which land reform could not be carried in Japan.

1,760,000 landlords were compulsorily forced to sell the land, 1,914,050 ha of land had been released, and 4,750,000 farm families (or 70% of the total) had purchased the land. Indeed, the Land Reform of Japan was a historic project of massive scale. Modification of land ownership, which is the basis of property rights and power, is a revolutionary measure, which may infringe on economic freedom and individual property rights. It was a compensated transfer, but it was no better than confiscation due to soaring inflation rate. How could such a “revolutionary” reform be carried out so rapidly within the bounds of capitalism? I would like to examine this issue focusing on two key aspects, without which land reform could not be carried in Japan.

1 State Power that Enabled the Land Reform

After the unconditional surrender to the Allied Forces in 1945, Japan effectively came under the occupation of American forces. The General Headquarters (GHQ)

strongly pushed forward the policy of demilitarization and democratization of Japan as had been prescribed by the Potsdam Declaration. Its anti-fascist policies turned Japan into a peaceful and democratic nation. Institutional reforms aimed at achieving economic democracy, such as land reform, breaking up the *Zaibatsu* and labor reform, were among such efforts. Especially, poverty and stagnation in rural areas were pointed out as the breeding ground of militarism in need of strong reform. It should be emphasized that unlike reforms in Germany, post-war reforms in Japan was carried out by leftist New Dealers and had taken place before the Cold War started. These were the subjective conditions of the power that carried out the thorough institutional reforms starting with the land reform.

Japanese land reform (the 2nd land reform) was proclaimed on October 1946, under the directive of the GHQ. The reform consisted of government-initiated direct and compulsory land transfer, targeting all tenant land of absentee landlords and tenant land of resident landlords in excess of 1 ha average holding limit, introduction of cash payment to the remaining tenant lands, reduction of farm rent, restriction of landlord's acquisition of tenant land, and the extensive empowerment of the local agricultural land committee (農地委員会) to carry out the reform.

It should be noted that, while the proposed reform was very radical, it was basically an extension of Japanese government's proposal, rather than a creation of occupied forces. Unlike the breaking up of the *Zaibatsu* and labor reform, the initial proposal of the land reform came from the Japanese side, in the form of the first land reform proposal decided on December 1945, a year before the establishment of the second land reform. The first land reform was a fulfillment of landlords reform that had been promoted by Japanese agriculture ministry since before the war. The first reform was a compromise with the landlord class and lacked thoroughness in breaking up the landlord system, because the primary objective was to bring about the reform itself. The expected land release of the first reform was only 900,000 ha, far less than that of the second reform (2 million ha, or 80% of the total tenant land). However, the ideas of establishment of owner-farming, and discrimination of absentee/resident landlord, etc., which materialized in the second land reform, were already contained in the first land reform. Therefore, it is clear that in the minds of Japanese agriculture officials,

land reform meant establishing the owner- farmers, an idea that had been formed before the war. Such a policy judgment reflected the realities of Japanese agriculture that had a vast population of small and medium landlords. The GHQ followed this Japanese policy line. Therefore it become an issue of continuity between the occupying forces and Japanese authority, the first and second land reform proposal, and the policies before and after the war.

Secondly, there is the issue of state power and land reform. Despite much compromise with landlord class, the first land reform proposal was met with strong resistance in the congress under old political system, and could be established as a bill only under pressure of the GHQ. In comparison, the second land reform proposal was far more disadvantageous to the landlords. Nevertheless, the second reform bill was made into law. The reason can be found in the exercise of the absolute power with which the GHQ governed Japan that “transcended Japanese congress and constitution”. Without exercise of supreme power, it would have been impossible for such a radical reform to be compatible with capitalism.

2 Methods of Implementation of the Land Reform

The agricultural land committee is one of the administrative committees, which was in charge of land reform. Administrative committees were introduced in post-war Japan as part of efforts to achieve administrative democratization. It is noteworthy that the land committee had its historical origin in a land committee of the same name, which had been established by the Farmland Adjustment Law passed in 1938. After the war, the land committee was invested with strong administrative competence as the state organ in charge of land reform. At the same time, the composition of committee members were changed significantly from its predecessor. The committees were established in prefectures(府県), cities(市), towns(町), and villages(村), administrative districts. In each districts, the committee consisted of 10 members, elected within each classes; three landlords, two owner farmers, and five tenant farmers. Besides aiding the state investigation of farmland transfers, they were in charge of overall implementation of the reform in the village, such as landholding of landlords,

cash payment, and protection of tenancy. They also settled disputes.

The administrative basis of land committees was the secretariat, which determined the contour of the reform. The role of the secretary was especially important. Average age of the secretary was 34 for men, which was rather young, and the level of education was quite high (60% of them were middle school graduates) compared to the rural average. Many of them had formerly been village office staff, company employee, teacher, or community police. The proportion of former farmer was only 10%. As much as 20% of the secretaries were returned war veterans, repatriates, or evacuee villagers. Many of them had experienced various occupations other than farming, including battle field experiences. Close relationship with peasant union was another important characteristic. This was due to the fact that "legal and mathematical literacy, progressive idea, impartial activism, democratic character, ceaseless enthusiasm" were required of a secretary.

Rural community assistants (部落補助員) helped the secretary. They were elected in each rural community in administrative village, in which the land committee was constituted. Functioning as the contact point between the land committee and villagers, role of community assistants determined the operational performance of the land committee. Land committeemen or secretary depended crucially on community assistants in their execution of duties. In order to conduct land survey, which is the key to the land reform, it was essential that they get cooperation from the village assistants, who had a thorough knowledge of village affairs. Leaders of life and production in a community, such as chief of farmer's association of community, community head, head of fire brigade, members of village council participated in the land reform as community assistants.

Since members of the land committee were elected upon recommendations by the community, their composition often had an inter-communal within a village. Land committee members were the regional representatives of the village as well as the class representative. Therefore, land committeemen were expected to have a disinterested view, rather than represent the class interest only. In general, the peasant union intervened in the election of land committeemen. Maintaining inter-community balance in the election of committee members were recognized as crucial.

As for the implementation process, sometimes the administrative unit of land sale program was community, rather than administrative village. When the exchange and consolidation of farmland were planned to be implemented simultaneously with the land reform, exchange and consolidation were administered by the administrative village, while the redistribution of farmland was planned on community levels. In many cases when a landlord applies for acquiring his land from his tenant farmer, committee member living in the same community as the applicant passes it on to the leaders' meeting of community for decision, to be ratified by the land committee.

Let's consider some specific cases. At the peak of the land reform, a renowned research institution affiliated to the ministry of agriculture conducted a case study contrasting two villages in Nagano prefecture. Village A had a well-managed land committee and the process of land purchase went smoothly. In village B, however, land purchase had been delayed, due to frequent disputes within the land committee. The difference between these villages could be attributed to the different positions of community assistants. The community assistant of village A represented the community, whereas community assistant of village B did not. This determined the operation and performance of the land committee. In village A, community land deliberative councils were created in each community to support the activities of the community assistant, precipitating the reform and encouraging participation of the villagers. The land committee here was very active as well sessions were open to the public, opinions of attending villagers were actively sought, and "there were clear signs of efforts to achieve land reform by the farmers themselves."

Landlord's acquisition of tenant land was an important issue in the implementation of the land reform. During the land reform, many landlords rushed to acquire the tenant land and many actually acquired the land. This phenomenon, especially notable in regions that experienced marked increase of rural population after dissolution of the army, was in part due to the existence of huge population of small and medium sized landlords. Poor harvest in 1945 and rampant inflation contributed to this trend. The attitude of land committees towards the tenant land acquisition reveals the nature of the land reform vis-à-vis the landlords. This is an issue of capitalistic approach of the land reform, which allowed the landlords to retain some land.

The only case known to this day is the case of Fukuoka prefecture, where the rate of accomplishing the landlords' request, namely, the proportion of the number of actual land acquisition to the number of requests, was about 90%. 20% of the requests provoked disputes, in which case the rate of actual acquisition dropped by 40%. Though the numbers are estimates, the rate of accomplishing the landlords' request is quite high.

In a village in Ehime prefecture, Shikoku, no particular characteristics were found among the landlords who acquired tenant land. Although there was no landlord having more than 10 ha of land, almost all landlords ran to acquire tenant land for various reasons. Influential landlords having 3 ha or more land wanted to acquire land in order to become the first class farmer or high class farmer in the village. Landlords having less land wanted to increase their land if only by one or two pieces. Landlords with 0.7 ha or less land wanted more land to increase their production of homegrown rice. It is noteworthy that small-size landlords had strong motives to enlarge their landholdings to the level just a little above the village average. This criterion of village average not only provided an important incentive to the acquisition of tenant land, but also became the tacit rule of admission by the land committee.

When the first land reform was announced, the number of landlord applying for the tenant land acquisition increased dramatically. However, the reform excluded from the compulsory transfer the lands deemed appropriate for near-future farming use absentee or resident landlords. The land committee had the authority to judge. Therefore, there could be massive acquisition of tenant land in regions where the land committee was not tough enough on the issue targeting peaceful solution. Many of the land acquisition by the landlords seem to have occurred on such occasions.

The second land reform was much stricter on the acquisition of tenant land, requiring permission of the provincial governor on top of authorization from the land committee. Illegal tenant land acquisition was reduced drastically. Nevertheless there were significant tenant land acquisitions, most of them illegal, which the land committee had nothing to do with.

In some cases, acquisition of tenant land was allowed to the landlords offering to sell additional land or all tenant land, subject to the condition that the reform would

be implemented smoothly and thoroughly. Such conditions can be summarized in the idea that "There is no need for landlords to exist, but we cannot take away their right to live". The criterion of "the landlord's right to live" was "the village average size of paddy field". Therefore, if a landlord's total farmland after the proposed acquisition of tenant land was made did not exceed the village average, such acquisition was allowed taking his farm management into consideration. In this way, the discretion of the land committee departing from the dictation of law made it possible for the reform to be compatible with the landlord's acquisition of tenant land.

Japanese land reform was implemented based on local autonomy. That is, local entities undertook the reform according to historically formed social norm. Landlord's acquisition of tenant land, which was not permitted by law, was allowed according to the community norm. This was the capitalist approach as well as the social structural factor that contributed to the rapid, thorough and "bloodless" implementation of the reform.

Finally, I would like to summarize the historical significance of Japanese land reform as the following two aspects from today's point of view. One is its difference from Chinese land reform. Critiques of the Chinese land reform point out that the method of public campaign and struggle gave rise to the "rule of terror and accumulation of enmity" that led to the devastation and destabilization of Chinese society. Japanese land reform contributed to the creation of a stable rural society in that it liberated the peasants from the restraint of poverty and subordination. Such rural social stability formed the background of rapid economic growth and long-term seizure of political power by the Liberal Democratic Party. The other is its historical significance for post-war Japanese agriculture. While the agricultural land system based on the "agricultural land ownership limited to the tiller" principle and the administration by the farmers themselves (agricultural committee) are very important, neither would have been possible without the land reform.

