

《REPORT》

Some Important Issues Regarding Rural Communities in Japan: Presentation of the International Conference East Agricultural History

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1 Japanese rural communities in East Asian context

Rural communities in Japan, compared to those in China and South Korea, are a closed community based on the household unit, in which some forms of social norms have been established. This notion has been widely accepted among Japanese researchers. The following are observations made recently by Japanese researchers engaged in studies on rural communities in China and South Korea.

Since rural communities in Japan are totally different from those in China, it is difficult to apply the notion or argument of a Japanese village society to China. Studies on Japanese villages have been conducted with a focus on the creation of a visible social structure and organization in household-based administrative villages and rural communities. However, this approach of focusing on social organizations and groups does not work well in China. Taking this approach, it is difficult to see how public life is managed in Chinese villages. This is mainly attributable to the fact that in Chinese villages, which do not have visible, constant social organizations or

groups, community-based issues are usually resolved in informal ways.

When asked about the size of their family, Chinese famers cannot give a clear answer, and farmers in South Korea have no notion of family homestead. The Japanese notion of family homestead cannot be applied to farm families in China or South Korea. Japan is characterized as a “settlement-based society”; in contrast, South Korea and China are both regarded as a “migration-based society.” It is not unusual for farmers in South Korea to sell up their farmland and leave their villages. Villagers do not feel particularly uncomfortable about accepting an unrelated family that comes into their village to settle down. In other words, little tension arises between incomers and local people due to migration. At the same time, however, cultural norms have been established as a system that enables people to mutually recognize their own genealogical positions beyond the boundaries of villages.

Japanese household and village systems are unique compared to other countries in East Asia. The development of those unique systems can be traced back to the early modern period (the Edo period), when in Japan there were rigid class systems under centralized feudalism. The *murauke* system was established in the late 17th century to the early 18th century, through which rice paid as land tax was collected in a lump sum on the basis of the village unit. Under the *murauke* system, a stem-family system for farmers, which enabled single inheritance by a legitimate son, was developed with family business, family property, and family name as three key elements. This system contributed significantly to the expansion of paddy field farming in the country. Currently, there are widely accepted theoretical explanations for the formation of rural communities in Japan. However, there is a limit to such theories, because it is difficult to obtain a detailed picture of rural communities of the later modern period. Given the fact that rural communities still play significant roles in Japan, it is important to conduct analysis of historical changes in rural communities and theoretically clarify the reasons why rural community systems have survived. Regarding the rural communities of the later modern period, I would like to discuss some important issues in this paper.

2 Multi-layered rural communities and incompatibility between *oaza* (a larger section in a village) and rural farming communities

A major characteristic of Japanese villages in the later modern period was that rural communities were developed in a multi-layered way. In Japan, villages are not in an independent position; various forms of rural communities exist in a multi-layered way under administrative villages. As indicated in many studies, a village community has a dual structure – an administrative village and a rural community. In terms of relationships with the government, an administrative village is a formal municipality, and *oaza* (a larger section in a village) and other rural communities are informal organizations. The clear distinction between formal and informal organizations is another characteristic of villages in Japan, in which we can see a reason why industrial associations (agricultural cooperative today), launched as small-scale, rural community-based organizations, were able to evolve into administrative village-level organizations.

Rural communities were identified in various ways, such as *oaza*, *koaza*, and *muragumi*, where various types of associations were created. In some areas, for example, the five-household group system created in the Edo period (the early modern period) was maintained until the Meiji period (the later modern period). Community units, such as the administrative village, the neighborhood association formed during wartime, and the early-modern village, are very important in understanding the rural communities of the later modern period. Early-modern villages and the areas known as *oaza* did not always correspond with each other.

Along with rural communities, administrative villages of the later modern period, which are villages created through the merger promoted by the government in the Meiji period, are the focus of research. Administrative villages cannot be disregarded when looking back at the history of rural communities in Japan. Through the merger of cities, towns and villages implemented nationwide in around 1955 (in the Showa period), villages created as a result of the municipal merger of the Meiji period were incorporated, as previous administrative areas, into rural communities. At present, many of the previous administrative areas have served as a foundation for village

development and community activities to protect and promote local agriculture.

In contrast to village communities which have often been approached from a historical perspective, there are rural farming communities which are statistically regarded as a basic area unit by the Census of Agriculture and Forestry. They can be seen as basic village communities, in the sense that they are the most basic community unit for livelihood and agricultural production.

When looking at relationships between the *oaza* (a larger section in village) and a rural farming community, only 27% of approximately 143,000 rural farming communities coincide with *oaza*, and 57% do not coincide with *oaza*, most of which exist as part of the *oaza* area. To approach the issue of early modern villages, I therefore came up with a concept to analyze the *oaza* consisting of a single rural community and the *oaza* consisting of multiple rural communities, with a focus on multi-layered rural communities – relationships between *oaza* and rural farming communities in particular. In short, the key point of my study is that multi-layered rural communities have been examined from the present perspective of relationships with rural farming communities.

This concept is necessary to understand how rural communities of the later modern period have undergone changes and how they have survived. In order to assemble a picture of rural communities, it is not sufficient to focus merely on *oaza*. Few historical or sociological studies have been conducted so far with a focus on multi-layered rural communities – except for some areas of ethnological and geographical studies.

3 Early modern villages and *oaza*

An early modern village means an administrative village of the early modern period, which served as a community for agricultural production and livelihood. In such a village community, a village headman had responsibility to collect rice from local farmers for land tax payment, under what is called the *murauke* system. Attention is also paid to *oaza*, rural communities of the later modern period. As a result of municipal mergers implemented in the Meiji period, administrative villages

were renamed as *oaza*. In the Meiji period, early-modern villages experienced dramatic changes, including the loss of administrative power and abolition of the *murauke* system.

What is important here is the fact that the area known as an early-modern village was not always the same as that of *oaza*. This is mainly attributable to the municipal merger implemented under the large/small administrative district system of the Meiji period (known as the *daiku-shoku sei* system) and the municipal merger of the Meiji period implemented immediately after the implementation of the *daiku-shoku sei* system.

In the times when the large/small administrative districting system was implemented throughout Japan (the *daiku-shoku* system period), for example, Nagano Prefecture actively promoted the creation of small administrative districts by merging several preexisting villages of a similar size. In the municipal merger of the Meiji period implemented immediately afterward, the Nagano Prefectural Government pursued the same policy of merging preexisting villages of small sizes to create a combined village. In principle, rural communities were merged to create a small administrative district, whether it consisted of multiple villages merged during the *daiku-shoku* system period, whether it was a mixture of merged villages and early-modern villages, or whether it was comprised only of early-modern villages. As a result, *oaza* consisting of multiple early-modern villages were created, and in some areas, rural communities with no *oaza* appeared in the wake of these municipal mergers.

Thus, the direction of the merger of the Meiji period was determined by sharing administrative experience with the merger implemented under the *daiku-shoku sei* system. This also eventually defined the relationship between *oaza* areas in villages created as a result of the merger of the Meiji period. Meanwhile, some villages created by merging several early-modern villages in the *daiku-shoku sei* system period became *oaza*, and some became administrative villages without undergoing merger in the times when the merger of the Meiji period was implemented throughout the nation. These *oaza* areas and administrative villages were newly created as a result of merger, but they had no relationship with early-modern

villages. In the later modern period, however, not a few *oaza* areas were created through the merger of early-modern villages, which is an important factor in considering the character of the *oaza*.

4 Nature of administrative villages and neighborhood-oriented elections

If at least one or more village council members are elected to represent every rural community concerned, this is an important issue involving the administration and politics of the village. I would like to call this form of election a “neighborhood-oriented election,” in which residents vote for candidates representing their communities.

Such neighborhood-oriented elections began to be observed after 1930. The question here is whether village council members were elected by *oaza* or by rural farming communities. In the Meiji period, village council members were never elected on the basis of which rural community they were representing. If any, residents would have voted on the basis of which candidate represented which *oaza*. For voters, a village council member represented the interests of the community they lived in.

In the Meiji period, some villages had a village council system that enabled the election of council members on an *oaza-by-oaza* basis. After the abolishment of this system in 1920, village council members representing a rural community (rural farming community today) began to appear, and during wartime, village council members came to be elected from each of the rural communities of the village. Thus, village council member systems changed with the times, from those allowing the election of village council members from early-modern villages only, to those enabling the election of council members from a poor village with a small population.

There were also villages where under the leadership of the village head, the number of seats in the village council was reduced to be equal to the number of the rural communities of the village. The village head established a system to elect the representative of each rural community as a village council member, saying that self-government cannot be achieved without cooperation and that the basis of cooperation is harmony. In some villages, a new negotiation-based system was introduced so that

even when the number of rural communities exceeded the number of seats in the village council, every rural community was able to produce a council member representing the community in rotation, or once every few years.

From the perspective of those governing a village, a neighborhood-oriented election was a method of involving rural communities, and from the viewpoint of the farmers who were governed, it meant the democratization of a village council through which the farmers could ensure their political and economic initiatives. The neighborhood-oriented elections also indicated that village administration and politics had entered a new historical stage. Major background factors behind this development include the introduction of universal male suffrage, expansion in the function of the administrative village and resulting changes in the relationship between administrative villages and rural communities, and conflicts of interest between rural communities. The neighborhood-oriented election brought about equality between rural communities, in addition to promoting a closer relationship between the administrative village and the rural communities (and their residents) placed under the administrative village. It also helped remove conflicts between rural communities and created stability in an administrative village. Therefore, such a neighborhood-oriented election cannot be described merely as a long-held tradition or a primitive form of village.

5 Neighborhood associations established during wartime and rural farming communities

In wartime, rural community councils were established to promote the restructuring and reorganization of villages. The central government's purpose was to make administrative districts coincide with the districts for agricultural associations and neighborhood associations. When there was any difference between these districts, various adjustments and changes were made eventually to converge administrative districts and neighborhood association districts to the level of rural communities (rural farming communities today). In general, the political and economic independence of farmers – the development of agricultural associations in

particular – played an important role in promoting the restructuring of villages.

The establishment of neighborhood associations is historically significant in three particular aspects. Firstly, the formation of the basic association was changed from an *oaza* level to a rural community level. During the period from the Meiji period (1868-1912) to the 1920s and 1930s, the basis of various types of organizations and campaigns in village communities was shifted from the *oaza* level to a rural community level. In this context, neighborhood associations were established in many rural communities, playing a significant role in giving great momentum to the development of various types of rural community-based associations. Secondly, the establishment of neighborhood associations was designed to replace old basic associations with new ones, rather than abolishing the *oaza* system or promoting administrative restructuring. Both *oaza* and rural communities remained as a traditional form of community. Lastly, the restructuring of villages by establishing a neighborhood association system was the starting point of the present rural community system. The positional relationship between *oaza* and rural farming communities underwent fundamental changes, leading to the present state of relationship between them.

From a historical perspective, it can be said that the establishment of a neighborhood association for each rural farming community was designed to strengthen the sense of rural community, while ensuring the reflection of opinions of people from every walk of life, by destroying the monopolism held by those in power. Although the establishment of neighborhood associations also carried another meaning – a transition to a cooperative system during wartime, these efforts which aimed for village administration reforms should not be disregarded. The same can be said for neighborhood-oriented elections.

References

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