

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AGRICULTURAL LAND REFORM IN JAPAN

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## I. INTRODUCTION

THE AGRICULTURAL LAND reform in Japan which took place immediately after the Second World War is considered to be one of the most thorough reforms in the Free World in achieving its original object of eliminating the landlord system of landownership.<sup>1</sup> This thoroughness will be accentuated when one compares the Japanese agricultural land reform with those in the countries of Southeast Asia and other developing countries which were carried out after the war. In this paper, an attempt will be made to discover the various conditions, historical ones in particular, which brought about this drastic agricultural land reform in postwar Japan.

The land reform in postwar Japan was carried out during a comparatively short period of approximately two years from 1947 to 1949. Let us consider it first in terms of the amount of change in landownership of agricultural land brought about through the reform. As of the end of March 1953, agricultural land purchased by the government in accordance with the Owner-Farmer Establishment Special Measures Law, enacted in 1946, one of the basic laws of the agricultural land reform, stood at approximately 1.81 million hectares. In addition, there were approximately 186,000 hectares of agricultural land which the government acquired as property tax in kind, and former military land, bringing the acreage of liberated agricultural land to around 1,994,000 hectares. This land acquired by the government accounted for one-third of the total agricultural land acreage prior to the land reform, and comprised almost 70 per cent of the tenant-cultivated land. The Japanese Government sold almost all this acquired agricultural land to tenants and part-owner farmers, with 3 million agricultural households benefiting from this scheme. These households represented half the total number of agricultural households at that time. In addition, by the end of 1952, the Japanese Government had purchased approximately 450,000 hectares of grazing and pasture lands and 134,000 hectares of forests and uncultivated land which it also released to agricultural farmers.

<sup>1</sup> This does not ignore the fact that the land reform was incomplete in a variety of ways: resident landowners were still allowed to hold a maximum of 1.0 hectare; the liberation of lands was mostly limited to agricultural land, leaving forest land almost untouched; and finally, at the initiatory stage of land reform, landowners were often permitted to take land back.

As a result, the figures for owner-cultivator and tenant-cultivator lands, which at the beginning of the agricultural land reform in 1947 stood at 61.5 per cent and 39.5 per cent respectively, were 89.2 per cent and 10.8 per cent in 1950 following the completion of the land reform. The decrease in tenant-cultivated land continued under the regulations of the Agricultural Land Law, enacted in 1952, based on the principle of *jisakunō-shugi* ("priority to owner-farmer"). In 1965, the figure for tenant-cultivated land was as low as 5.3 per cent of the total cultivated land. Today, it is considered that owner-cultivated land accounts for over 95 per cent of the total cultivated land. Further, the number of owner-farmers increased considerably while tenant-farmers dropped sharply in number. In 1947, owner-farmers and tenant-farmers accounted for 36.5 per cent and 26.6 per cent respectively of the total farming households. These figures changed to 61.9 per cent and 5.1 per cent by 1950. The decrease of tenant-farmers continued in the following years, resulting in a negligible 1.6 per cent of the total farming households in 1970. This percentage does not reach 5.0 per cent even when the number of tenant-owners<sup>2</sup> whose characteristics are similar to those of tenant-farmers are included. On the other hand, the percentage of owner-farmers runs to 80 per cent of the present total of farming households. At the same time, it should be noted that the remaining tenant-cultivated land was 0.2 hectare per tenant-farmer in 1970 and was only 0.28 hectare per lender. The farm rent for the remaining tenant farming is in all cases paid in terms of money, with the rent percentage having been reduced to an average of about 10 per cent for ordinary rice fields; this is especially striking when one considers that prewar rents averaged about 50 per cent and were paid mostly in kind. These results of the agricultural land reform can be considered far more thorough than even those of the land reform in Taiwan. Thus, as a result of the agricultural land reform, it will be no exaggeration to say that in postwar Japan the landowners, as a class, completely ceased to exist.<sup>3</sup>

The view has been repeatedly expressed by scholars and other peoples of Southeast Asia, America, and Europe that these policies of the postwar land reform did not have their source in the Japanese Government, but rather were brought to Japan by the American Occupation Forces. For example, Prof. E. H. Tuma of the University of California states in his study *Twenty-six Centuries of Agrarian Reform* that

the philosophy of the postwar reform, then, was not indigenous. It was imported and foreign to the country. The theory was that small peasant farming in place of the prevalent tenant-landlord system would help democratize the community and stabilize its political system. Some Japanese groups believed in that philosophy, but such was not the attitude of the majority or of the government. [18, p. 136]

<sup>2</sup> "Tenant-owner" refers to those farm households owning less than 50 per cent of the cultivated land of a farm.

<sup>3</sup> Immediately after the agricultural land reform, some scholars maintained that the landlord system in the so-called reorganization of feudalistic landlord system had not been abolished but merely reorganized. However, this view no longer exists today, having been completely undermined by the actual results of the reform.

According to Professor Tuma, the idea of postwar agricultural land reform was clearly imported from outside Japan and was not indigenous to Japan. He states that it was something unrelated to Japan. Certainly, nobody can deny that for the drastic execution of agricultural land reform policies, the supra-constitutional and supra-parliamentary existence of the American Occupation Forces and its pressure were important factors. However, it is incumbent upon this writer to state that the view held by Professor Tuma that the philosophy of postwar agricultural land reform was imported into Japan is quite incorrect and that such views are contradictory to historical facts. If what Professor Tuma states is correct, how can one explain the fact that such a drastic reform was completed in a shorter period of roughly two years and that the fruits of the agricultural land reform have been maintained almost completely to date, after the termination of occupation?

On the contrary, the truth is that the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Japan since 1920 had been formulating measures to establish an owner-farmer system of land ownership and had carried out a part of these plans, though on a smaller scale. One can even say that it was the experience and performance of such efforts that made possible the drastic postwar agricultural land reform on a larger scale. On December 4, 1945, immediately after the end of the war, Japan's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry prepared and presented to the Diet the Land Reform Bill, as an amendment to the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law, entirely independent of the Occupation Forces, with the object of easing the critical food situation and ameliorating the social unrest which prevailed in rural communities at that time. This was promulgated as a law on December 28, after some amendments had been added. This is generally referred to as the First Agricultural Land Reform Law, and it is well known that the famous "Memorandum on Rural Land Reform," announced on December 9 by the General Headquarters, became an influential supporting factor in the enactment of this law.<sup>4</sup> However, the law was rejected by the General Headquarters on the grounds that the contents were insufficient and incomplete. Afterwards, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Japan, based on recommendations and pressures by the General Headquarters, started to compile a Second Agricultural Land Reform Law, which was enacted and promulgated on October 21, 1946. The postwar Japanese agricultural land reform was carried out in accordance with this Second Agricultural Land Reform Law, which consists of an amendment of the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law and Owner-Farmer Establishment Special Measures Law. The contents of the First Agricultural Land Reform

<sup>4</sup> Judging from the then-prevailing conditions, it can be considered that even without the strong support of the General Headquarters, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry might have enacted the agricultural land reform law later, setting aside the contents of the law. The following opinion held by Dr. R. P. Dore is persuasive:

Even if they [the American Occupation] had not [demanded its reform], there are good reasons for believing that some sort of reform would have taken place, though not, perhaps, one as thoroughgoing as that which actually came. [3, p. 129]

Law were superseded by the more thoroughgoing Second Agricultural Land Reform Law.

It should be noted here that this First Agricultural Land Reform Law was enacted and promulgated by the authorities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, independent of the General Headquarters, and that the law itself was the extension of constant efforts since 1920, by officials of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to establish an owner-farmer system. Therefore, it must be stressed in particular that these preparations and efforts over many years were the fundamental requirements for the materialization and complete fulfillment of the postwar reform. In other words, the postwar agricultural land reform in Japan had a "prior history" [19, p. 1], which will be a noticeably different feature from most of the developing countries in Asia. This "prior history" includes not only the history of agricultural land policies of prewar Japan such as the establishment of an owner-farmer system, but also the long history of the peasant movement, which brought about the gradual weakening of the landlord system, as well as various national controls during the war. It reminds us of the old saying that Rome was not built in a day, and we believe at this point it would give some suggestions to those developing countries carrying out or about to carry out agricultural land reforms if we made clearer the "prior history" of the Japanese agricultural land reform.

## II. PRIOR HISTORY OF AGRICULTURAL LAND REFORM

### A. *Beginning of the Peasant Movement and Its Development*

The landlord system in Japan was established in the 1890s and continued to flourish during the prosperous period of the 1900s. However, following the "rice riots" in 1918 and the national upsurge of tenancy disputes, the landlord system began to decline and finally under national wartime controls went into a process during which it lost its functions.<sup>5</sup> The process of decline of the landlord system became clear statistically when the heretofore ever-increasing percentage of tenant-cultivated land to the total agricultural land began to decrease gradually following the year of the "rice riots," having recorded its peak in 1917, and when, similarly, the ever-increasing number of landlords who owned more than fifty hectares began to decrease gradually from 1920, after its peak in 1919.<sup>6</sup>

The epoch-making incident in the decline of the landlord system was the rice riots in 1918. These riots greatly influenced not only rural communities but also brought about immeasurable changes to Japanese society as a whole. According to the *Kome sōdō gojū-nen* [Rice riots: fifty years after],

<sup>5</sup> Definitions of the "process of decline" and "loss of functions" of the landlord system were borrowed from Dr. Kurihara [7].

<sup>6</sup> In 1919, the percentage of tenant-cultivated land to the total agricultural land was 45.99 per cent while the number of landlords throughout the nation who owned over fifty hectares reached 2,451 in the same year.

after the "rice riots" the picture of Japanese society began to change considerably. With the spread of a new social philosophy, people started to turn their attention to "social problems" centering around the class confrontation between capital and labor. Various social and political movements, centering around labor activities, were quickly organized by the people and began to develop at a rapid pace. [14, p. 11]

In this connection, the success of the Russian Revolution in 1917 was a great impetus to the riots.

The direct cause of the rice riots was the sharp increase in rice prices. One of the reasons for such increase was the development of capitalism through the First World War and the increase in the demand for rice. Speculation by rice merchants particularly accelerated the sharp increase in prices. When housewives in a fishing village in Toyama Prefecture began a movement in July 1918 demanding a reduction in the price of rice, it produced an immediate nation-wide chain reaction. As a result, the people rose in revolt throughout the nation for a period of two months from the end of July to the beginning of October, and resulted in riots involving some 10 million people. The police forces suppressed this movement by using all available force. Also approximately fifty thousand soldiers were called into action in sixty cities, towns, and villages, resulting in a great deal of bloodshed from battles with bayonets and guns. These riots ended in 1918 with 5,112 people being found guilty of crimes related to the riots, out of which seven were sentenced to life imprisonment [14, p. 6].

A large number of tenant farmers took part in these rice riots. As they had to give about half of their crops to landlords as rent, they ran short of rice for their own use and were thus forced to make up their own shortage by purchasing rice at higher prices. Since they had to purchase price-inflated rice, they had, in a sense, a common interest with the urban citizens and this induced them to participate in riots to "demand rice." With the turning point of the rice riots, and further aided by the influence of the democratic mood brought about by the success of the Russian Revolution, the Japan Peasants' Union was formed as a national organization in April 1922. Under the slogan "Land and Freedom," the Japan Peasants' Union instigated a succession of tenancy disputes throughout the nation, demanding a reduction in rents, the establishment of cultivating rights, and a move towards "land to the peasants." As a result, tenancy disputes, which totalled only 85 cases in 1917, increased sharply to 1,680 cases in 1921, involving 146,000 people (see Table I). In such a situation, the Japan Peasants' Union grew rapidly into a flourishing organization, having 675 local branches (tenant unions) with some 51,000 union members as of 1925.<sup>7</sup>

The tenant-farmers used various measures in their struggle including non-payment of the rent to their landlords, formation of non-cultivation unions, joint cultivation of land to prevent the confiscation of land by landlords, demonstra-

<sup>7</sup> As of 1925, the number of peasant unions in the nation stood at 3,496, numbering some 310,000 members. In 1933, there existed 4,810 unions, whose membership totalled approximately 300,000.

TABLE I  
DEVELOPMENT OF TENANCY DISPUTES

Year	No. of Disputes	No. of Landlords Participating	No. of Tenants Participating	Cultivated Land (ha) Involved
1917	85			
1918	256			
1919	326			
1920	408	5,236	3,465	27,390
1921	1,680	33,985	145,898	
1922	1,578	29,077	125,750	90,253
1923	1,917	37,712	134,503	89,080
1924	1,532	27,223	110,920	70,387
1925	2,206	33,001	134,646	95,941
1926	2,751	39,705	151,061	95,652
1927	2,053	24,136	91,336	59,168
1928	1,866	19,474	75,136	48,694
1929	2,434	23,505	81,998	56,831
1930	2,478	14,159	58,565	39,799
1931	3,419	23,768	81,135	60,365
1932	3,414	16,706	61,499	39,028
1933	4,000	14,312	48,073	30,596
1934	5,828	34,035	121,031	85,838
1935	6,824	28,574	113,164	70,745
1936	6,804	23,293	77,187	46,420
1937	6,170	20,236	63,246	39,582
1938	4,615	15,422	52,817	34,359
1939	3,578	9,065	25,904	16,623
1940	3,165	11,082	38,614	27,625
1941	3,308	2,037	32,289	21,898
1942	2,756	11,139	33,185	25,544
1943	2,424	6,968	17,738	11,442
1944	2,160	3,778	8,213	5,096

Sources: [10, p. 497]. Figures for 1921 were supplemented by Nōmin kumiai sōritsu gojū-shūnen kinen-sai jikkō iinkai, ed. *Nōmin kumiai gojū-nen-shi* [Peasants' union: fifty years' history] (Tokyo: Ochanomizu shobō, 1972), p. 4.

tions, mass absenteeism by children from schools, withdrawal from fire stations and other public occupations, and withdrawal from cooperative societies and other organizations (leaders were usually landlords at that time). On the other hand, measures used by the landlords in retaliation included notification of unpaid tenancy rent by means of certified mails, transfer of the right to claim the tenancy rent, arrangement of tax arrears and other public charges, and occupation by force of tenant-cultivated land which was not surrendered voluntarily on demand. In addition, it should be noted that they also resorted to such measures as the institution of legal suits demanding the rent for tenancy or the return of

tenant-cultivated land, prohibition of entry into tenant-cultivated land, and seizure of unharvested crops and movable properties. They also formed landlord unions and stubbornly maintained their attitude of confrontation<sup>8</sup> which often resulted in the famous disputes and bloody riots which mark the history of the Japanese peasants' movements. The large-scale disputes, that took place in 1923 in the village of Kizaki in Niigata Prefecture, as well as those in 1924 in the village of Fuseishi in Kagawa Prefecture and the village of Gunchiku in Kumamoto Prefecture, are remembered even today. Tenancy disputes were still on the increase during the agricultural panic of the 1930s, totalling over 6,800 in 1935. However, after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, tenancy disputes were severely suppressed by the government under the expanding militarism of the semi-war structure of the society, and this government suppression resulted in a gradual decrease in the number of disputes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that more than two thousand tenancy disputes were recorded every year even after the outbreak of the Pacific War.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the development of tenancy disputes, the relationship between landlord and tenant ceased to be something comparable to the relationship between parents and children, a popular comparison of earlier eras. Rather, the terms of the relationship became more like those of a modern contract. Landlords were beginning to feel that these relationships with tenants were too troublesome and some landlords gradually lost interest in holding land. There were even landlords who wanted to dispose of their lands. Thus, the gradual "process of decline" of the Japanese landlord system began.

#### B. *Agricultural Land Policies before Land Reform*

In light of the development of tenancy disputes on a national scale and their serious consequences, the government established, in November 1920, the Research Committee on the Tenancy System<sup>10</sup> within the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce,<sup>11</sup> in order to establish measures to solve the land problems which were at the heart of these disputes. The committee set up an ad hoc committee for deliberation on a draft tenancy law and a draft tenant union law, aiming at the improvement of the tenancy system. The committee also investigated the possibility of establishing an arbitration system for tenancy disputes. Although no final decisions were made on the former two drafts, the committee did, in connection with the arbitration system, establish the Tenancy Conciliation Law in July 1924. This law was designed to permit the Tenancy Conciliation Committee and the courts to settle amicably, upon the request of a party concerned, disputes arising over tenancy rent and other subjects relating to tenancy.

<sup>8</sup> The rise and fall of the landlord unions was similar to that of peasant unions. The peak was reached in 1927 with a total of 734 throughout the nation having 57,000 union members.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed record of the Japanese peasants' movements refer to [2].

<sup>10</sup> The Research Committee on the Tenancy System was abolished upon the establishment of the Research Council on the Tenancy System in May 1923.

<sup>11</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce was divided into the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in March 1925.

Following the enforcement of the Tenancy Conciliation Law, a Tenancy Section (the first Section Chief was Tadaatsu Ishiguro) was established in the Agricultural Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, and four tenancy officers with assistant officers were assigned to deal with the conciliation of tenancy disputes. Furthermore, tenancy officers and their assistant officers were posted in each prefecture and, by the end of 1941, their numbers had reached fifty and eighty-six respectively. These tenancy officers played important roles in a variety of ways. They investigated candidates for the member of the Tenancy Conciliation Committee, submitted their own individual opinions concerning tenancy problems either to a court or to a conciliation committee, and conducted various surveys and legal judgments at the request of courts or conciliation committees. They also handled disputes not covered by the conciliation law and tried in advance to prevent tenancy disputes from arising. Thus, in order to fulfil their duties, they had to be experts on the agricultural land system and the facts of tenancy relationships. As will be mentioned later, their expert knowledge proved to be quite useful in the postwar agricultural land reform. Approximately 22,000 disputes, which accounted for 42 per cent of the total 52,000 disputes registered during the period from 1924 to 1937, were settled in accordance with the Tenancy Conciliation Law (calculated from [10, p. 526, Table 7]). Although assessments of this law vary, the following evaluation appears reasonable:<sup>12</sup>

The Tenancy Conciliation Law produced a new law that restricted the landlord system and also served to stabilize tenancy rights by lowering tenancy rents within a limited range. Of course, where demands by tenants were too excessive, the law served to check these demands and maintain the landlord system. However, it can be said that the emphasis of the law was to restrict the landlord system. [1, pp. 46-47]

Another method to ease tenancy disputes was to directly regulate the relationship between landlords and tenants by establishing special laws relating to tenancy. The purpose of such laws was to restrict the rights of the landlords on the one hand and to protect the status of tenants and establish their cultivation rights on the other, so that tenancy rent could be regulated by the law. Although deliberations relating to the tenancy law started with the establishment of the Research Committee on the Tenancy System no discernable progress was made. Meanwhile, the tenancy relationship worsened year by year. In view of the situation, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry drafted a tenancy bill in 1927, and, after adding some amendments, submitted it as the tenancy law draft in 1931. Although this draft was passed by the House of Representatives, it was shelved by the House of Peers. However, with the worsening of the tenancy problems through the agricultural panic, the government could not afford to ignore the situation, and in 1937, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry prepared an Agricultural Land Bill which included the contents of the tenancy bill which they had submitted earlier to the Diet. It was, however, rejected.

<sup>12</sup> It should be added that there are some objections to these views.



With the enactment of the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law of 1938, the tenancy law was partially realized. It was the year following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, and therefore this law shared in common many features of other laws made during wartime. This law was to integrate the existing law aimed at establishing owner-farmers, and tenancy law draft into a single law. It also established city, town, and village agricultural land committees and made them the most important organizations for the enforcement of the law. However, with regard to regulations concerning tenancy, the following were the only regulations appended to strengthen tenancy rights.

(1) Contracts for the lease of agricultural land shall, even without registration, be binding on third parties, and such lease contracts shall be unaffected by the transfer of the leased land through sale by the owner, by mortgage, or by other actions regarding the leased agricultural land.

(2) Unless a lease-holder of agricultural land withholds payment of tenancy rent without good reason and against faith, or unless the landowner has to cultivate the land himself or finds it necessary to use the agricultural land as housing sites or for other purposes which are considered reasonable, the landlord can neither cancel the lease contract unilaterally nor refuse the renewal of the said contract upon expiration of the contract period.

With regard to the tenancy conciliation, the law stipulated that for speedier settlement of disputes, tenancy officers, in addition to the parties in the dispute, could apply for tenancy conciliations. "The Outline of Agricultural Land Reform Account" describes the significance of the establishment of this law as follows:

After the lapse of forty years since the enforcement of the Civil Code in 1898 and the eighteen years since the start of preparations for the enactment of the tenancy law in 1920, the establishment of the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law incorporating special regulations to deal with the use, profits, and disposal of agricultural lands, in contrast to treating such matters under the Civil Code, indicates the turning point of the landlord system of landownership, although it cannot be said to have caused any deterioration in the landlord system of landownership. [9, p. 93]

The third method to ease tenancy disputes and the accompanying unrest in rural communities was the establishment of owner-farmers. Namely, the government promoted as its policy the conversion of tenant-farmers to owner-farmers, and the establishment of these owner-farmers (including efforts to maintain owner-farmers through provision of financial assistance designed to forestall a reversion to tenant farming) was the main theme of the agricultural land policy prior to the land reform. Earlier in 1922, the Ministry of Communications, at the request of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, permitted the financing of the program to establish and maintain owner-farmers from its Post Office Life Insurance Funds, but the scale of this financing was relatively small. In the government also, the necessity for the establishment and maintenance of an owner-farmer system with the assistance of the nation was recognized and so the government conducted its own surveys and research. The Research Council on the

Tenancy System, which succeeded the Research Committee on the Tenancy System, submitted a report on this subject to the Minister of Agriculture and Commerce. The government, based on this report, promulgated the Regulations on Subsidies for the Establishment and Maintenance of Owner-Farmers in May 1926, for those farmers who wished to establish or maintain owner-farmer cultivated lands utilizing loans from the Post Office Life Insurance Funds, which were repayable on long terms at a low interest rate. (The interest rate was 3.5 per cent per annum, and loan and interest were repayable within twenty-four years in equal installments after a one-year deferment.) This scheme aimed at establishing and maintaining 117,000 hectares of owner-farmer cultivated lands, which accounted for approximately one twenty-fourth of the nation's total tenant-farmer cultivated land. However, the regulations were based on a system of free establishment, which meant that it was entirely up to the landlord whether or not he sold his land. Therefore, this system can be described as aiming at the establishment of owner-farmers without infringing upon the right of private land ownership of a landlord.<sup>13</sup>

When the cabinet was formed by Giichi Tanaka of the Seiyūkai party in 1927, further attempts were made to expand and strengthen the policies toward the establishment and maintenance of owner-farmers. An Owner-Farmer Cultivated Land Bill (Agricultural Land Fund Bill) was thus drawn up. This bill was designed to issue agricultural land bonds for a maximum sum of ¥80 million annually for a thirty-five year period. Through these bonds, 630,000 hectares were to be converted into owner-farmer cultivated land during the thirty-five-year period, and adding in approximately 120,000 hectares which were to be subsidized by the existing regulations, the total of 750,000 hectares was to account for 30 per cent of the total tenant-cultivated land. However, this plan was scrapped after cabinet deliberation due to objections by the financing authorities that the financial burden of the program was too great. Later, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry submitted to the Diet a bill to establish a Special Account for Owner-Farmers Establishment and Maintenance Aid Funds, which was based on a smaller scale Owner-Farmer Cultivated Land Bill. Although this bill was passed by the House of Representatives, it was shelved by the House of Peers.

In the meantime, tenancy disputes were becoming more and more serious and measures were urged for the expansion and strengthening of policies designed to establish and maintain a system of owner-farmers. As a result, in December

<sup>13</sup> The regulations were, in a sense, measures allowing landowners to dispose of their lands at government expense. On the other hand, they also provided a slight hope for those tenant-farmers and part-owner farmers who wished to become owner-farmers; the psychological effects of this cannot be denied. Tetsuo Katō, a peasant poet, wrote as follows [6, p. 53]:

Jinushi yōgo no saku toshi shirazu  
Murabitora jisakunō sōtei o yorokoberu rashi

[Not knowing the measures for supporting landowners people in villages seem to rejoice at the possibility of becoming owner-farmers.]

1937, after improving the existing Regulations on Subsidies for the Establishment and Maintenance of Owner-Farmers, the government promulgated the Regulations on Aid Subsidies for the Establishment and Maintenance of Owner-Farmers. This scheme was designed to provide ¥40 million a year from 1937 for a period of twenty-five years, totalling ¥1 billion, in order to establish and maintain some 1 million owner-farmer households. Under this program approximately 417,000 hectares, or one-seventh of the total tenant-cultivated lands could be converted under the owner-farmer establishment and maintenance plans. The sources of funds were to come equally from Post Office Life Insurance Funds and the Funds of the Deposit Bureau (of the Ministry of Finance) at an annual interest rate of 4.5 per cent for the former and 3.2 per cent for the latter. Since it was decided that the government would cover the interest of 1.3 per cent for the Post Office Life Insurance Funds, debtors (farmers) had only to pay back the debts for a period of twenty-four years, after deferment of six months, at an annual interest rate of 3.2 per cent.

The Agricultural Land Adjustment Law of 1938 did not have any special stipulations on the establishment of owner-farmers as this was left to the Regulations on Aid Subsidies for the Establishment and Maintenance of Owner-Farmers. However, the law did represent some progress in that it stipulated that the national government could enforce the compulsory expropriation of uncultivated lands, whenever necessary, although cultivated lands were excluded. In the meantime, circumstances arising from the development of the war made even more urgent the need for reform in the agricultural land system. Various programs were submitted by several different groups. For example, in 1939 the League for the Reform of the Land System in its Agricultural Land System Reform Policy advocated the nationalization of tenant-cultivated lands and the establishment of owner-farmers. In the following year, the Shōwa Research Group (Shōwa Kenkyūkai) demanded the creation of a land control system, the gradual establishment of owner-farmers on a reasonable scale, and payment of farm rent in cash. Under these circumstances, a general plan for the reform of the agricultural land system was drawn up by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (December 5, 1941). The establishment of owner-farmers on a large scale was the plan's main aim. The plan was to set up an Agricultural Fund as its operational body to which authorization was to be given to enforce compulsory expropriation of agricultural lands (lands owned by absentee landlords and those of over five hectares held by landlords in residence). It is worthwhile to note that before the end of the war expropriation of agricultural lands, on a compulsory basis if necessary, had been planned by officials of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry on a comparable scale to that of the first postwar agricultural land reform plan. However, this program did not materialize and instead, the policies to expand the establishment of owner-farmers were continued as before. In December 1942, the Government announced the "Outline for the Replenishment and Expansion of Undertakings to Establish and Maintain Owner-Farmers." The target of this projected twenty-five-year program was approximately 1.5 million hectares of cultivated lands and 0.5 million hectares of uncultivated lands.

Financing of the program was to come, in principle, from the Funds of the Deposit Bureau; the program was designed to assist those who wished to establish themselves as owner-farmers. The funds were to be repaid on annual installments over a period of twenty-four years at an interest rate of 3.2 per cent per annum after deferment for one year. However, this expansion scheme did not make any stipulations for the compulsory expropriation of agricultural land.

The achievements of the various owner-farmer establishment and maintenance undertakings can be summarized very briefly. During the twenty-year period from 1926 to 1945, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry established and maintained roughly 555,000 owner-farmer households, covering a cumulative total of 299,000 hectares of agricultural lands, from funds totalling approximately ¥443,800,000 (calculated from [11, p. 37]). These figures are 14.5 per cent of the 1926 figure of 3,820,000 for tenant and part-owner households (1.51 million tenant households and 2.31 million part-owner households), and the acreage figures for 1945 are 10.8 per cent of 2.78 million hectares of tenant-cultivated lands at the commencement of the scheme. Although the fact that one-tenth of the total tenant-cultivated lands was converted or maintained as owner-cultivated lands over a period of twenty years may not be termed extraordinary, it is quite an achievement when one considers that the original scheme was to establish and maintain as owner-cultivated lands one twenty-fourth of the total tenant-cultivated lands over a period of twenty-five years. Approximately one-seventh of tenant-cultivated land-holding farmers in Japan benefited from this scheme. Thus, agricultural policies of prewar Japan developed with the establishment and maintenance of owner-farmer undertakings as their main theme, and tenancy conciliations and tenancy adjustments were carried out to supplement this main policy line. Based on the achievements of the owner-farmer establishment and maintenance policy (Small Peasant Maintenance Policy), the postwar agricultural land reform was carried out in a more thoroughgoing fashion. In other words, one can even say that the postwar agricultural land reform was a successor to the main thrust of the prewar agricultural land policy.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, it can be said that the postwar agricultural land reform in Japan had its "prior history."

### C. *Wartime Ordinances and Food Control Policies*

Reflecting the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 and the imminent start of the Second World War in Europe, it became urgent for Japan to establish, in addition to the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law, wartime agricultural legislation in order to cope with the situation prior to the commencement of the Second World War. The National Mobilization Law was enacted together with the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law and put into force on May 5, 1938. Based on this law, ordinances were enacted on Farm Rent Control, Temporary

<sup>14</sup> "We can judge the substance of the agricultural land reform to be as follows: The land reform involved extremely drastic measures and in this sense it can be called revolutionary. However, the substance of the reform involved only the further development of past agricultural policies and changed little in nature from the small farmers maintenance policies" [13, pp. 301-2].

Price Control of Agricultural Land, and Temporary Administration of Agricultural Land. Although these three ordinances were primarily initiated to check inflation and maintain agricultural production as a part of the wartime economic policies and therefore not aimed directly at any reform in the landlord system of landownership, the landlord system was indirectly forced to change as a result of various developments.

An Ordinance for Price Control was enacted in September 1939, in accordance with the National Mobilization Law, but as it was considered difficult to regulate farm rents by this method, a Farm Rent Control Ordinance was promulgated separately in December of the same year. This halted the rise in farm rents which had been increasing gradually since the beginning of the war. This ordinance not only stopped the increase of farm rents, but also authorized the prefectural governors to order landlords to decrease farm rents which were considered unreasonably high (Article 6). Each prefectural government thus made an effort to establish reasonable farm rents through such reductions.

On February 1, 1941, an Ordinance for the Temporary Control of Agricultural Land Prices was promulgated. This ordinance was a part of other price control measures but also had special characteristics as an agricultural land policy. The enactment of the ordinance was discussed on the grounds that it was necessary not only for the prevention of inflation but also because the higher prices of land were making costs to the farming population more severe, forcing cuts in farmers' profit and hampering the establishment of owner-farmers.

Developments of the war brought about the conversion of agricultural land into factory sites or housing sites or simply ruined agricultural lands and resulted in a lowering of agricultural production due to the shortage in agricultural labor and materials. In order to cope with this situation, it became necessary to control the agricultural land itself. As a result, the Ordinance for the Temporary Administration of Agricultural Land was promulgated and put into force on February 1, 1941. The devastation and conversion of agricultural lands came under the control of this ordinance, and controls on planting and compulsory cultivation of abandoned cultivated land also began. After the amendment of this ordinance in March 1944, controls on the transfer of agricultural lands were also undertaken. In order to avoid decreases in the production of food, it became necessary to acquire permission from prefectural governors for the transfer of ownership of land, permanent rights of tenant cultivation, and rights of lease of agricultural land, as well as permission to make contracts to establish the right of permanent cultivation, or lease contracts.

Although these wartime controls on farm rents, agricultural land prices, and agricultural land itself meant indirect restrictions on the ownership of landlords, it had become impossible for landowners to oppose these measures. Reflecting wartime developments, their social status lessened more and more, for the reasons which are illustrated in the following quotation.

The industrialist has had the advantage of being able to maintain his position from the attack of controls on profits on the pretext of falling productivity. However, it

is impossible for landowners today to find any social reasons either to justify their maintenance or positive protection against the strengthening of controls on farm rents and agricultural land prices. Their position in the society has become that isolated from actual agricultural production. [15, p. 126]

What dealt an even more decisive blow to the landlord system in Japan, was the system of officially allocated food delivery. In order to secure enough food during wartime, in 1940 the Japanese Government put into practice an officially allocated delivery system of rice. This national control on rice resulted in an important change in the relationship between landlords and tenants. From 1941, tenants paid farm rents directly to the government instead of to landlords (except for the rice for the landowners' own consumption). The government, in turn, paid to the landowners the cash equivalent of the rice paid as farm rent by tenants. Thus, the farm rent in kind which landowners used to receive from tenants virtually changed into a payment in cash.

In addition, another important change occurred in the rice delivery system. A subsidy was granted to producers (tenants in this case) for quota delivery from 1941 which, as a result, brought about a gradual increase in the producers' rice price. However, the price of rice (landowners' rice price) which was the basis for the calculations of farm rents to be paid by the government to landowners on behalf of tenants, although raised to a certain extent, was generally left at a lower level. The adoption of the dual rice price system for landowners and producers was designed to encourage an increase in production during wartime by favoring producers. However, under the dual rice price system designed to favor producers, the heretofore high farm rents declined sharply during the war. Based on calculations that a yield per *tan* of rice fields (a *tan* being about 0.1 hectare) was two *koku* (about 240 kilograms of unhulled rice) and the farm rent one *koku* (this was the generally accepted percentage), the changes in farm rent percentages are as shown in Table II.

Let us take the rice crop of 1945 as an example. In this case, as the price of landowners' rice was ¥55 per *koku* while producers' price was ¥300 on the same basis, the gross income per one *tan* of rice fields would be ¥600 when a

TABLE II  
CHANGES OF FARM RENT UNDER DUAL RICE PRICE SYSTEM (Yen)

	1941 Year's Crop	1942 Year's Crop	1943 Year's Crop	1944 Year's Crop	1945 Year's Crop
Landowners' rice price	44	44	47	47	55
Producers' rice price	49	49	62.5	62.5	300
Gross income from rice planting per <i>tan</i>	98	98	125	125	600
Farm rent per <i>tan</i>	44	44	47	47	55
Percentage of farm rent	45%	45%	38%	38%	9%

Source: [7, p. 48].

Note: These figures are calculated on the basis that a yield of rice per *tan* is two *koku* and the farm rent is one *koku*.

tenant produced two *koku* of rice per *tan*. On the other hand, as the farm rent to a landowner was one *koku* per *tan* and the rice price (landowners' price) was pegged at ¥55 per one *koku*, the farm rent percentage was only 55/600, or approximately 9 per cent.

As a result, despite the fact that the rate of farm rent in kind was still kept at a semi-feudalistic high ratio of 50 per cent, the actual rent in cash fell as low as 9 per cent. Thus, not only did the farm rent fall considerably during the war, but also its payment virtually changed into cash. It cannot be denied that this had a revolutionary significance in the history of farm rent in Japan. The already declining influence of the landlords was reduced further by the national allocated delivery system, and coupled with other national controls, the landlord system in Japan entered "a period of loss of function" after 1940, as stated by Professor H. Kurihara as follows:

Thus, in line with the progress of state monopoly capitalism during the war agriculture came under direct state control, whereupon the high amount and percentage of farm rent in kind in the past was transformed compulsorily into a lower sum and percentage of farm rent in cash. This resulted in the fall of the socio-economic function of a landlord based on interdependence of high farm rents and low wages. This is how the process of the virtual dissolution of the landlord system progressed. [7, pp. 47-48]

This was really the picture of the landlord system in Japan prior to the postwar agricultural land reform. Japan's defeat in the war provided an opportunity to further these developments toward a "dissolution of the landlord system," and the role played by the Occupation Forces can be evaluated as an important pressure in the achievement of this goal.

### III. SOME CONDITIONS FAVORABLE FOR THE PROMOTION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND REFORM

Because the land reform in Japan was not suddenly implemented after the war but was put into practice in relation both to other prewar agricultural policies and also in relation to practices followed since the formation of a modern state in the Meiji era, there existed some administrative and technically favorable conditions that helped the achievement of the postwar reform, which could hardly be found in other developing countries. Although this point has often been ignored or less evaluated in the past, it seems that these conditions are special ones more or less and are worth reviewing in the light of various difficulties encountered in carrying out agricultural land reforms in developing nations. Some of these specific conditions are examined below.

#### A. *Provision and Establishment of Cadastral Survey*

By the time of the agricultural land reform in Japan, rights of ownership had been established for almost all agricultural land, forest land, and housing sites throughout the nation, and most of the land was registered at that time. This is an important point in view of the fact that at present when carrying out agricultural

land reform in developing nations, the initial difficulties lie in the incomplete and insufficient cadastral survey record. As an agricultural land reform is, in a sense, a clerical procedure of transferring rights of landownership from one person to another, it would be impossible to perform any land reform without knowing to whom a piece of land belonged and who was cultivating the land actually. It is said that the most laborious and expensive task in carrying out an agricultural land reform in many developing countries is the establishment of the rights of landownership. For example, the report by FAO shows that the cadastral survey in the Philippines covers only 20 per cent of the total land area [4, p. 26].

In Japan, the Land Tax Revision was promulgated in July 1873 in order to establish the basic revenue source of land taxes for the early Meiji Government. The prerequisite condition for this undertaking was, of course, to confirm landownership and determine the landowners. The Meiji Government established a system of land certificate by enacting the Regulations on Land Certificate Transfer in the preceding year of 1872. This Land Certificate System was "to confirm the right of ownership of land by the possession of an official document, i.e., a land certificate, in which an owner of land, the type of land, its acreage and price were set forth," and thus, the confirmation of the landownership and determination of the landowner were made by the issuance of a land certificate. Each copy of the land certificate was kept respectively by the person involved, the village authority concerned and the local governmental agency. The undertaking to revise the land tax began in 1873 parallel with the progress of this land certificate system, and with its near completion in 1881, the revenue foundation of the Meiji Government was established.<sup>15</sup> This meant at the same time that rights of ownership for each piece of land throughout the nation was established. Although the land certificate system remained in force for many years, the system was abolished after the enactment of regulations on the land cadastre in March 1889 stipulating registration of lands in the land cadastre. This exemplifies that the establishment of landownership for each piece of land provides the initial basis necessary to carry out an agricultural land reform.

#### B. *Establishment of Bureaucratic System*

The postwar agricultural land reform in Japan was carried out "from above" by government officials. The bureaucratic system in Japan, which was an integral part of the Emperor worship, was by nature a privileged and authoritative bureaucracy<sup>16</sup> and was well-suited to the old and tenacious tendency among the

<sup>15</sup> The land tax rate was first established at 3 per cent of land price, and was then reduced to 2.5 per cent. The percentage of the land tax in the whole national revenue reached 81 per cent in 1874 and 75 per cent in 1877.

<sup>16</sup> "The bureaucratic system in Japan, with its strong tradition since the Meiji era, formed a huge and powerful privileged system and conducted authoritative administration over the people in a high-handed manner for many years, just as the samurai class had done in feudalistic days. . . . In other words, the prime feature of the Japanese bureaucracy was that the social privilege obtained by holding a post in a governmental office was reflected in the eyes of the people as something of a status symbol of superiority" [17, p. 190].



masses of "making much of the government and little of the people." This type of bureaucratic system was preserved since the Occupation Forces adopted indirect control of Japan, and so the problem remained unchanged even in the democratic atmosphere prevailing immediately after the war. The traditional trait of the Japanese people as portrayed by their "absolute obedience to the orders of authority" or "yielding to power" was most conspicuous among farmers including landlords. The uniform agricultural land reform throughout the nation carried out by the privileged bureaucratic officials based on the tradition of "from the higher to the lower" could be said to have been facilitated by the mental attitude of the Japanese farmers. In combination with the national administrative organizations to be discussed hereunder, this point was one of the most important factors in guaranteeing the fulfillment of a bloodless reform within a relatively short period of time.

### C. *Uniform Organization for Carrying Out Agricultural Land Reform*

It can be said that for carrying out an agricultural land reform, the more unified and simple the administrative offices and organizations which control the agricultural land reform, the better. In the case of Japan, all administrative aspects of the reform were centralized in the Agricultural Land Department of the Agricultural Administration Bureau in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The Agricultural Land Department created six Regional Agricultural Land Offices as liaison organizations in order to keep direct contact with prefectural governments and their agricultural land committees. Furthermore, at the prefectural government level, it was decided that the agricultural land departments of each prefectural government<sup>17</sup> should act in direct cooperation with the municipal (city, town, and village) agricultural land committees and municipal governments. The administrative organs in charge of the enforcement of agricultural land reforms were comparatively simply organized and power was centralized and controlled by the Agricultural Land Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. This fact played an important role in guaranteeing a powerful and uniform enforcement of the reform. Dr. Laurence I. Hewes, Jr. of the Occupation Forces, who controlled the direction of the agricultural land reform in Japan, pointed out the as follows, with regard to the success of the land reform.

First was the very completely organized nature of Japanese society. From Emperor to buraku each level in the political structure is organized effectively and has been used continuously for centuries to pass down and execute government orders. This feature is not necessarily superimposed or artificial but appears to have been part

<sup>17</sup> At prefectural government levels, there were already sub-sections in charge of agricultural land, established in accordance with the tenancy officers system based on the enforcement of the Tenancy Conciliation Law of 1924, the start of the Owner-Farmer Establishment and Maintenance Undertakings, the enforcement of the Agricultural Land Adjustment Law, and various controls on agricultural lands during the war. These sub-sections in charge of the agricultural land expanded into the Agricultural Land Section, and this was further integrated into the Agricultural Land Department together with a Cultivated Land Section and a Reclamation Section.

of the social development of the Japanese. At any rate, it greatly facilitates the execution of national programs, even in very small and remote villages, in a surprisingly short time. [5, p. 52]

#### D. *Executive Staff of Agricultural Land Reform*

It was necessary to secure a large staff, both at the central and local levels, in order to execute the agricultural land reform. It is estimated that some four hundred thousand people were engaged in the agricultural land reform throughout the nation, out of which the committee members of city, town, and village agricultural land committees and the *buraku* ("scattered farmhouse clusters in a village") assistants accounted for as much as 90 per cent.

Among these participants in the agricultural land reform, the role played by the secretaries of city, town, and village agricultural land committee was vitally important. Individual agricultural land committees had three secretaries on the average, totalling some thirty-two thousand throughout the nation. As these secretaries were directly responsible for surveys, purchases and sales of the agricultural land at the lowest level of administration, it is no exaggeration to say that whether or not a secretary was gifted with superior clerical ability and a positive personality had much to do with the success of the reform.

Such able secretaries were quite prevalent in rural areas immediately after the war. This was because in those days most repatriates from the old colonies, demobilized soldiers from overseas, and evacuees from larger cities were still in rural areas without suitable jobs, and the post of secretary in the agricultural land committees provided excellent employment opportunities for them. With their relatively high level of education,<sup>18</sup> they could positively engage in the promotion of the agricultural land reform in the democratic atmosphere prevailed after the war. As Dr. Hewes states, ". . . in the majority of cases, much of the credit for achievements under the land reform program must be given to these local clerks" [5, p. 57].

Furthermore, the Tenancy Officers System, based on the enactment of the Tenancy Conciliation Law of 1924, greatly contributed to the achievements of the Agricultural Land Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Regional Agricultural Land Offices, and Prefectural Agricultural Land Departments in the land reform. The tenancy officers and their assistant officers, attached to the central and prefectural governments since the enactment of the system, had been engaged in tenancy conciliation cases for many years, and thus they had accumulated abundant specialized knowledge concerning agricultural land. The existence of these people played an important role in the achievements of the postwar agricultural land reform. Had it been planned to train experts at the

<sup>18</sup> According to a survey of secretaries belonging to city, town, and village agricultural land committees conducted on August 1, 1948, the average age was thirty-four for male staff and twenty-one for female staff. Those who finished secondary school (old system) or higher courses with "grade-A" accounted for 47 per cent, and reached 60 per cent including "grade-B." University graduates (old system) totalled 1 per cent, and 3 per cent were graduates of high schools or colleges (old system), with almost all female secretaries receiving secondary school education [9, p. 157].

time of the inauguration of the postwar land reform, it might not have been possible to execute the reform within such a comparatively short period of time.

#### E. *Ideological Background*

It should be recognized that a *nōhon-shugi* ideology (a "physiocratic" ideology) existed as one of the ideological backgrounds to the postwar agricultural land reform. This physiocratic ideology can be traced back as far as the old system of feudalism, but since it has various historical sources, it is difficult to provide a neat, comprehensive definition. In his book, Dr. R. P. Dore has called the *nōhon-shugi* ideology "agriculture-is-the-base-ism" [3, p. 56]. Herein present the following definition: "An ideology which helps to establish and stabilize the life of peasants whose self-reliance and self-management is based on their assiduous labor, and who are necessary for the existence of a state" [8, p. 15]. In other words, this can be termed as *jisakunō-shugi* ("priority to owner-farmer principle") or *shōnō-shugi* ("small farmer principle"); this type of physiocratic ideology has been conspicuous among agricultural leaders since the Meiji era. Coupled with ideas of nationalism, it occasionally induced the planned emigration for settlement into old Manchuria for example, but at the same time, it survived among the main stream of bureaucratic officials of the agricultural administration, and as such can be considered as a tacit idea which encouraged and facilitated the postwar agricultural land reform. The keynote of the Ishiguro agricultural administration, which was the guiding principle of agricultural policies from the end of the Taishō era up to the end of the war, was based on *nōhon-shugi*.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Minister of Agriculture, Kenzō Matsumura, who promoted the land reform after the war, is known for his advocacy of complete application of the priority to owner-farmer principle [16, p. 286]. Dr. Takekazu Ogura, recognizing the current of agrarianism in the agricultural land reform program, recently stated as follows:

The agricultural land reform was based on a combination of agrarianism and the small farmer principle, i.e., stressing the importance of family farming. Mr. Kenzō Matsumura was a strong supporter of this type of owner-farmer principle and it is well known that when he was Minister of Agriculture, the first agricultural land reform was put forward as policy. A more complete form of the owner-farmer principle was contained in the second agricultural land reform. [12, p. 34]

The above is a brief attempt to elucidate some of the conditions which to be considered for facilitating the achievements of the postwar agricultural land reform in Japan. Coupled with the agricultural policies prior to the reform, the

<sup>19</sup> Tadaatsu Ishiguro entered the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce in 1908, he became chief of the Tenancy Section of Agricultural Affairs Bureau in September 1924, chief of the Agricultural Affairs Bureau in December of the same year, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in 1931, and the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry in 1940. After resigning from the post in the following year, he reassumed the post of Minister in 1945. The agricultural ideology, for which he is still remembered, was the basic idea of agricultural administration from the 1920s to 1940s, and the main current of the agricultural bureaucracy was under its influence.

existence of these conditions were specific factors which led to the thoroughgoing fulfillment of the postwar agricultural land reform.

Finally, there is one more point which must be added. This concerns the timing of the execution of the agricultural land reform and the importance of its social environment. When the agricultural land reform in Japan was proposed and put into effect, the Japanese people had experienced an unprecedented defeat in the war and were suffering from devastation and inflation, and the postwar food crisis was at its peak. Socially, it was a heightened period of unprecedented left-wing labor movement activities following the abolition of the Law for Maintenance of Public Peace. It was in a sense a critical period for Japanese capitalism and the situation signified the eve of a revolution. Under these social circumstances, it became a subject of vital importance for the then ruling class to ease the social unrest in rural communities, break up the possibility of a tie-up between workers and peasants, and maintain and stabilize the system of capitalism. The postwar agricultural land reform in Japan thus was not proposed under normal circumstances, but was raised and requested under quite a critical, unusual situation. In this particular sense, it must be pointed out that the extent of the success of the agricultural land reform is closely connected not only with the existence of various conditions for its execution, but also with the timing and circumstances under which it was carried out.

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