

Columbia Project on Asia in the Core Curriculum

ASIA: CASE STUDIES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

A GUIDE FOR TEACHING

Myron L. Cohen, editor

**MASTERWORKS OF ASIAN LITERATURE IN COMPARATIVE
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ASIA IN WESTERN AND WORLD HISTORY

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SOCIAL SCIENCES**

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**Anthropology:
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Rural Society in Japan: Past and Present

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I. INTRODUCTION: CENTRAL POINTS

Japan has long fascinated social scientists and historians for both its stability and its dynamism. It has had some form of central state authority for almost fifteen hundred years and was the first and by far the most successful non-Western society to industrialize. The nature of Japan's rural society and economy has been crucial to its historical experience as a pre-modern agrarian state and as an industrializing nation-state. Rural Japan thus presents an important case for **any** study of the nature of preindustrial states and of socioeconomic change. The following themes will be discussed:

- **Agrarian Ecology, Technology, and Productivity.** Wet-rice cultivation is an ecological system radically different from that of European temperate-zone grain farming. The requirements of growing irrigated rice have affected settlement patterns, social relations, and long-term technological progress.

- **State-Peasant Links.** The Japanese experience belies a linear political trajectory for preindustrial states. Japanese history has not been characterized by the progressive growth of an ever-stronger central authority, but rather by oscillations between periods of centralized authority and periods of regional autonomy.

Control of cultivators and production has always been crucial to this dynamic.

- **Population Dynamics.** Documentation for studying the early modern demography of Japan is among the best in the world, and permits us to understand the population characteristics of modernization. Rapid population increases in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were slowed considerably by conscious practices to limit family size in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A generally expanding rural economy meant that per capita aggregate output was rising.

- **Rural Social Organization.** Households and villages have been the elemental units of rural society for two thousand years. However, the Japanese countryside has also been structured by administrative districts, irrigation networks, voluntary associations like pilgrimage groups, and commercial links. The scale and boundaries of these many units have not often overlapped. Rural Japan is thus organized not by a simple nesting of groups but as a complex set of organizational overlays.

- **Agriculture's Role in Industrialization.** The Japanese rural experience of the last two centuries illuminates the material, social, and ideological preconditions necessary for successful modernization as well as the vital contributions that agriculture can make to industrialization itself.

- **Farmers and the Advanced Industrial State.** Agriculture's declining place in the national economy has stirred much debate in Japan, as in other industrial states, about the future of the countryside in such societies. Contemporary Japan presents a striking contradiction between farm crisis and rural prosperity.

II. MAJOR TOPICS

AGRARIAN ECOLOGY, TECHNOLOGY, AND PRODUCTIVITY

Asian wet-rice was originally a tropical swamp crop, and its becoming the staple of Japanese agriculture required considerable technological ingenuity, social effort, and political pressure over the past two thousand years. Japan is a temperate zone archipelago of four major islands and thousands of small islands, with an area about the size of Italy and about one and one-half times that of the British Isles. Its natural vegetation is luxuriant and its coastal waters abundant, but its landform is largely forested

mountains, bisected by numerous short and steeply graded rivers. This "corrugated" topography has limited agriculture and settlement to the coastal plains and interior basins that constitute only about one-fifth of its already small land mass.

Productivity in European grain farming is rooted in and limited by soil fertility, and depends on increasing the scale of operations and greater inputs of complex machinery. Wet-rice, with nutrients supplied and fixed by an aqueous medium, can yield high per-unit outputs through improvements in seed varieties, better water supply and drainage, manuring and fertilizing, and more intensive labor inputs. This has given a particular shape to Japanese agricultural development: extensive breeding of cold-resistant and region-specific rice varieties; sophisticated river control, ponding, and field drainage techniques; proliferation and refinements of hand tools; elaborate green manuring and composting schedules; and transplanting, multiple weedings, and other intensive labor practices. These have had important ecological and social consequences.

Ecologically, wet-rice cultivation requires a support system of water, leaf and tree materials for fertilizer and feed, and fields for complementary dry crops. Japan, in effect, is a country of some two hundred small river basins, each composed of a plain and its surrounding mountains, and constituting a relatively contained and integrated ecological unit. The forests, scrublands, rivers, and dry crop fields have had to be exploited and managed as a resource system within these small basin units.

Socially, because cultivation is intensive, farming operations have seldom been large, and small holders (as owners or tenants) have predominated. Moreover, because of the small-basin resource system, agriculture in Japan has created multiple and cross-cutting lines of cooperation and competition among foresters, farmers, and fishing folk, and among farmers themselves, who both share and compete for access and use of necessary resources.

STATE-PEASANT LINKS

While there is frequently a tendency to think of preindustrial states as emerging and growing progressively larger and stronger, the case of Japan cautions against such a linear model. Rather, Japanese history may be seen as oscillating periods of centralized authority and regional autonomy. These oscillations can be followed through the roughly five periods of Japanese history:

- 300 BCE to 700 BCE Increasing stratification within local groups fueled conflicts among large clans in western Japan. The Yamato clan emerged as preeminent, and developed central state institutions around an emperorship that combined indigenous Shinto and imported Confucian and Buddhist notions of authority.
- 700 to 1100 This new aristocratic state was centered at the flourishing court capital of Heian (Kyoto), in west central Japan.
- 1100 to 1600 With the decline of the aristocratic elite, central authority fragmented during centuries of struggle among military houses and among Buddhist monastic establishments, which often had regional bases of power.
- 1600 to 1868 In the early seventeenth century, the entire country was consolidated under the bureaucratic-feudal rule of the Tokugawa shoguns. Tokugawa power began devolving to regional lords by the early nineteenth century.
- 1868 to 1945 This first part of Japan's "modern century," which was characterized by nation-state building, capitalist industrialization, and imperial expansion, ended in the country's defeat in World War II.
- 1945 to present In the latter part of its "modern century," Japan recovered from the wartime devastation and since then has grown rapidly into the world's second-largest economy.

Control of rural cultivators and the product of their labors has always been crucial to this dynamic of centralization and decentralization, and Japan offers a fascinating study of state policies toward rural society and their unintended consequences. There have been four great land reforms in Japanese history: the seventh-century Taika reforms, late sixteenth-century cadastres undertaken by Hideyoshi and subsequent Tokugawa reform policies, the land tax revision of the 1870s, and the post-World War II land reforms. Each was essentially an effort to reestablish a viable countryside of small-holding, self-cultivating, taxpaying cultivator households. And each embodied certain contradictions that ulti-

mately precipitated serious political and economic problems for the state and cultivators alike.

In the seventh century, the state claimed public ownership of all paddies, forests, and meadowlands; it mandated a periodic household census and apportionment of paddy lands to cultivators, who were to make tribute payments directly to state administrators. However, to promote new land development, in subsequent centuries it granted extensive exceptions to noble families and religious establishments. This eroded the fiscal base of state land revenues, and enriched and emboldened the provincial military elite who eventually usurped court authority.

In the late sixteenth century, the general Hideyoshi undertook a national land cadastre as part of his efforts to unify the country. Registration, measurement, and uniform taxation schedules were enforced by the first Tokugawa shoguns to regain direct appropriation of rice tax. Again, however, the state's inducements to develop paddy land resulted in much new land that escaped full taxation, while fluctuations of climate and market left many peasants vulnerable to pressures to pawn, sell, or abandon their land. By the early nineteenth century, large absentee holdings and undertaxation were causing great fiscal difficulties for the Tokugawa shogunate.

The new Meiji elite moved quickly to conduct a new cadastre, restore property rights to cultivators, and institute a national cash land tax. These measures, however, soon contributed once again to concentrations of landholdings and widespread tenancy in the early twentieth century. It was this tenancy that the post-World War II land reform addressed. This reform was highly effective in recreating a rural population of independent small holders, but its legal limits on ownership have prevented farmers from achieving significant economies of scale now possible with mechanization, and contributed to the virtual disappearance of full-time rice farmers.

POPULATION DYNAMICS

Population estimates of pre-seventeenth century Japan are very tentative; they generally infer gradual growth from about five million people in 300 CE to a range of ten-fifteen million in the early 1600s. For the Tokugawa period, however, Japan has the best demographic data of any early-modern society. The temple household registries, which survive for a number of areas in series over long periods of time, together with national surveys and other records, are a unique historical archive for most of the period.

demography and population dynamics prior to modernization.

Research on these materials has documented for the seventeenth century a rapid rise in population, an expansion of cultivation acreage and output, and the growth of large urban concentrations, including the explosive growth of the capital, Edo (Tokyo), which became the largest city in the world by 1720. At the same time, extended family groups gave way to smaller households which maintained independent farming enterprises. There was much regional variation in the particular customs of succession and inheritance, but the general preference among the rural population was for a "stem family," in which a single son or daughter takes a spouse and remains, while other siblings marry out. Thus, in a stem family, succeeding generations of husband-wife pairs reside together and sustain a family line.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, population growth slowed considerably, and there is strong evidence of infanticide and other measures to limit rural family size. Formerly, this was attributed to profound poverty and famine which, according to the theories of Malthus, checked population growth. Recent research has shown that the overall rural economy, both agricultural and non-agricultural production and trade, continued to expand. This suggests that efforts to limit family size were more deliberate. The prevalence of adopting heirs or sending out excess children and evidence of sex-selective infanticide are now interpreted as strategies to maintain a gender balance and family labor force appropriate to family resources.

RURAL SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

Households and villages have been the elemental units of rural society for two thousand years. Despite variations according to time and place, their character and form have always been shaped by both state intervention and local circumstance. Wet-rice ecology predisposed nucleated settlements of cultivator households, which were internally connected by a variety of village groupings, including male and female youth groups for unmarried adolescents, rotating credit circles, pilgrimage associations, and shrine parish guilds.

The village as focal point was further strengthened over the centuries by state efforts to assign social control and tax collection responsibilities to small residential collectivities which were ordered in hierarchical chains of administration. In the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, for example, self-regulating

villages were constituent units of larger "village groups," several of which formed the jurisdiction of local districts within the domain.

However, in addition to administrative hierarchies, the Japanese countryside was also structured by multi-village irrigation networks, linkages among area shrines and temples, and commercial activities like trading circuits, markets, and labor recruitment chains. The boundaries of these units often did not coincide. In this sense, the organizational pattern of rural Japan has not been simply a nesting of small households within discrete village settlements, but a complex set of organizational overlays.

Much of the regional variety in household form and succession preferences was homogenized as a result of by the state's promulgation in 1896 of the national Civil Code, which attempted to enforce a patriarchal and patrilineal version of the stem family. Revisions of the Civil Code in the late 1940s were intended to democratize and nuclearize family form, although in the countryside a significant number of three-generation households remain. More influential than legal change has been the appeal of a metropolitan lifestyle; the spread of "middle-class consciousness" throughout rural Japan has further standardized family form and lifestyle and largely eliminated urban and rural differences.

AGRICULTURE'S ROLE IN INDUSTRIALIZATION

As noted in the introduction, the Japanese experience of the last two centuries illuminates the material, social, and ideological preconditions necessary for successful modernization as well as the vital contributions that agriculture can make to industrialization itself.

The question of European industrialization, as Simon Kuznets argued forty years ago, is not how poor countries industrialized and got rich, but rather how they got rich enough to industrialize. What were the crucial antecedents to their takeoff to industrial prosperity? This has become a key question in research on the early-modern period. Developments in Japan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrate that while the European take-off was exceptional, it was not unique. Japan, too, shared these preconditions, many of which were features of rural society and economy:

- a growing rural economy, with stable population levels, provided a basis for general prosperity (although it was not equally distributed);
- an infrastructure of schools, state administration, and trans-

portation networks extending into the countryside; growth of significant rural industries ("protoindustrialization") in many regions (e.g., cotton spinning, silk reeling, papermaking);

- state and local regulation of resource extraction which curbed overexploitation of forests and soils and stabilized local ecologies; and

- popular advocacy of the value of thrift, pragmatism, literacy, agricultural experimentation, and self-governance.

In short, Japan in 1868, poised on the verge of modern nationhood, had a number of material, social, and cultural features that in retrospect were vital to its rapid industrial and urban transformations.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the rural sector continued to make several essential contributions to Japanese industrialization. The agricultural land tax was the major source of government revenues, land rents provided important funds for private investment, and the export of silk and cotton goods earned crucial foreign currency. Rising agricultural production was essential to feed the growing urban markets. And rural family patterns both promoted and regulated migration to cities. That is, the stem family ideology stipulated that one member of the next generation would remain to succeed to the family farm; in being sloughed off, his siblings were free to join the urban work force. After World War II, the complete mechanization of rice agriculture further freed surplus farm labor for the expanding industrial recovery and growth of the 1950s and 1960s.

FARMERS AND THE ADVANCED INDUSTRIAL STATE

Rural Japan is no longer agricultural Japan. Like the United States and northern European countries, the population engaged in farming has declined precipitously in the past three decades, yet the future of agriculture and the role of rural society in industrial Japan continues to be hotly debated by policy planners and scholars. Japan is the essential non-Western case for understanding state and agriculture—and the state of agriculture—in advanced capitalist societies. It presents the stark paradox of a relatively prosperous countryside and a gravely imperiled agricultural sector.

Crop subsidies, equipment loans, a vigorous agricultural cooperative movement, and non-farm employment opportunities have made part-time small-scale rice farming the predominant form of

agriculture today. Mechanization has created one of the most technologically advanced and economically inefficient farming systems in the world; farming units are underscaled and overcapitalized. This crisis is exacerbated by conflicting pressures on the national government; it has made tremendous investments in and commitments to agriculture, yet it faces intense foreign demand to liberalize food imports.

Ironically, the same government programs that have produced the agricultural crisis have also brought enormous infrastructural improvements to rural society. Many of the road networks, telephone and sewer lines, community centers, and other public service facilities that have significantly improved and "metropolitanized" rural life have been constructed with subsidies from the basic agricultural assistance programs or ancillary programs. By such measures as household income, car ownership, and house size, rural life compares favorably to urban life, even as educational and economic opportunities continue to lag appreciably.

III. ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

1. What have been the ecological and social consequences of wet-rice cultivation in Japan?
2. What have been the implications of Japan's political history for state-peasant relations?
3. The peasant village is often seen as the elemental unit of the countryside. How true has that been for rural social organization in Japan?
4. What has been agriculture's contribution to industrialization in Japan, and what is now its fate in the industrial society?

IV. SELECTED READINGS

- Dore, Ronald P. *Shinohata: Portrait of a Japanese Village*. New York: Pantheon, 1978 (student reading). A splendid ethnographic account of a village in the post-World War II decades, with an opening chapter on early twentieth-century developments.
- Ogura, Takekazu. *Can Japanese Agriculture Survive? A Historical and Comparative Approach*. Second edition. Tokyo: Agricultural Policy Research Center, 1980 (faculty background). An exhaustive survey of agricultural history, policy, technology, and prospects.
- Smith, Thomas C. *The Agrarian Origins of Modern Japan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955 (faculty background). Still a comprehensive and reliable overview of agricultural development and rural society in the Tokugawa centuries.

Press, 1981 (student reading). A highly readable history of Japan to 1868, with useful emphasis on rural development and ecological themes.

See also the many entries in the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (1983) and the relevant articles in the *Cambridge History of Japan* (1988-).