

LAND REFORM IN JAPAN

WOLF LADEJINSKY

LAND reform, or "land to the landless," is as old an issue as the agrarian societies which have given rise to it. But never has the issue been sharper and more explosive than in Asia during the post-war years. The cause is simple enough: too many peasants worked somebody else's land for a pittance, and poverty was their hallmark. The peasants of Asia have never been satisfied with their lot, but until recently their conservatism, inertia, and ingrained obedience to the state and their landlords kept the pot from boiling over. With a revolution sweeping over Asia these past fifteen years, this is no longer true. The forces that have kept the peasant within well-defined bounds have broken down under rising agrarian discontent.

It is this strife that the Communists have been able to exploit so successfully, first in Russia and then in China. They did so by posing as advocates of reform designed, allegedly, to benefit the peasantry. Actually, however, Communist agrarianism was nothing but a means to secure the support of the peasants as a prelude to the seizure of political power. But Communist claims and pretensions have not gone unchallenged. Non-Communist Asia has demonstrated that the ownership of the landlord's land by the landless can become a reality without Communist fire and brimstone, broken promises, and enslavement of the peasantry.

The first to demonstrate this was the Japanese land reform. Implemented more than a decade ago, it has left a lasting mark upon Japan. It has also exerted deep influence upon other countries where the issue of man and his relation to land could be overlooked only at the peril of a regime's existence. How the Japanese reform came about, the nature of the reform, and its far-reaching consequences are the subject of R. P. Dore's *Land reform in Japan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959. Pp. xvii + 510. 55s).

Dore has written the first important book on this subject in the English language. He

brought to his task an excellent command of Japanese, years of study and first-hand observation of the post-reform village, thorough familiarity with the literature, and an uncommon ability to write good, if wordy, English. His is a pioneering effort, and it is not likely to be duplicated for some time to come. The scope of the book is formidable. Fully 115 pages are devoted to the causes underlying the reform, and 345 pages deal with the reform itself and what it has produced in terms of the farm economy, village social structure and politics. For anyone interested in post-war Japan in general, let alone agrarian Japan, the book is indispensable; anyone who cares to read the book carefully will surely be rewarded with a fund of knowledge otherwise unobtainable.

In a book of this scope, the reviewer can only note some of its highlights. Nearly a dozen years after the implementation of the land-distribution program it is clear that the Japanese village is no longer what it was before the reform. Economically, politically and socially the changes have been revolutionary, and Dore is right when he concludes that from virtually every point of view the Japanese village is in a much better state now than before.

In late 1945 General Douglas MacArthur issued his now historic directive, calling upon the Japanese government to "take measures to insure that those who till the soil of Japan shall have a more equal opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labor," and thus remove the "economic obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies, establish respect for the dignity of man, and destroy the economic bondage which has enslaved the Japanese farmers through centuries of feudal oppression" (SCAP, *Political reorientation of Japan* [1949] p. 753). Even to staunch supporters of the reform—Japanese and American alike—this seemed tinged with an overdose of wishful thinking. In opposing this directive the landlords and their

allies played heavily on the peasant's traditional reliance on authority and on his fear of responsibility. The landlords warned the tenants that if the reform became law, the tenants would have to stand alone and friendless against the calamities of nature and governmental policy; they would lose their educated leadership, which had always been provided by the landlords; and they would no longer have the "protection" supplied for centuries by the benevolent overlords. The temples would go to rack and ruin because the farmers, alone and unaided, would be unable to support them.

Events have proved, and this is the core of Dore's book, that it is the lofty promises which have prevailed rather than the landlord's threats. Not only have the landless Japanese become owners of the land they once cultivated under extremely onerous conditions, but they are holding on to the land. And this, in turn, has unleashed an agrarian revolution which makes the land reform so significant for Japan—and possibly for other reasons too. Having gotten the land, they are now furnishing evidence anew that Arthur Young, famous seventeenth-century English agriculturist, was right in saying that "the magic of property [ownership of land] turns land into gold." The zeal to improve the land has never been greater, and the productivity of the land never higher.

On the social side, the reform has narrowed the traditional differences between classes in the villages. In his detailed analysis of the social changes that followed the basic alteration of the ownership pattern, Dore makes it clear that one need not be an economic determinist to appreciate the fact that with the loss of their affluence the Japanese landlords lost much of their influence. Fortunately, the reform did not displace one class and put another in its place. Rather, it resulted in a sharing of power among members of the old and new leadership.

The political effects are equally significant. The "beast of burden" theory, based on cheap food and cheap and plentiful labor provided by the village, has disappeared. The farmers are a political power who can reward and punish as the case may be. The traditionally discriminatory attitude of the government toward agriculture has undergone a fundamental change: hence government price-support policies, credit facilities, tax-re-

form, and a host of other measures tending to strengthen the village community. In the light of the recent past, these are fundamental changes which augur well for the future of the Japanese farm community. The authentic losers in this process are the Communists. By opposing the reform on the ground that it was just another capitalistic scheme of "selling the peasants down the river," they lost whatever political capital they enjoyed in the rural areas.

To many an observer, land reform in Japan was nothing but a product of the American occupation. This is an important point because it has a serious bearing on the paramount question: how lasting will the reform be? One of the merits of Dore's book is that it does not accept any facile answer. There is no denying the enormous influence of MacArthur's directive. It is equally true that the occupation authorities steadily supported and implemented the idea of reform. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the reform constituted a response to Japanese rural conditions that was formulated to a large degree by the Japanese themselves and carried out in its entirety by the Japanese. "The land problem," Dore quotes a Japanese scholar, "is the alpha and omega of the problems of agriculture, and of it the tenancy problem is the most important part" (p. 105). No end of evidence can be cited to the same effect, and from circles politically opposed to each other. When "the impoverishment of the peasant economy has begun to touch the limits of the bearable" (p. 117), it is not strange to see the military and the intellectuals of various hues and colors join forces to proclaim peasant ownership of land the country's prime prerequisite.

It is fair to conclude, therefore, that even MacArthur's unquestioned authority could not have altered the traditional land structure if indigenous circumstances had not been ripe for the move. More specifically, the land reform idea was a Japanese idea, rather than one imposed by the conqueror. Of course, the forces opposing any change in the status quo were too strong prior to the occupation, and nothing much was done about a land-distribution program or any other program that might have eased the lot of the working farmer of Japan. But the conditions demanding a reform were there, and so were the eager and enthusiastic members

of the ministry of agriculture, to say nothing of the tenants themselves, without whose cooperation the occupation could not have played the role of midwife to a reform long overdue.

The indigenous character of the reform greatly enhances its chances of survival. A dozen years have elapsed since its implementation and there are no signs that its existence is threatened, or that post-war government measures to bolster Japan's marginal economy will slacken or cease. This reviewer disagrees with Dore's pessimistic views about the government's attitude in the years immediately ahead.

The author is not on firm ground when, in support of his thesis, he invokes developments which may or may not materialize. Admittedly, the presence of six million farm families on 15-16 million acres means a highly vulnerable agricultural economy no matter how successful the agrarian revolution. The issue, therefore, is not one of final solutions, but of ameliorative measures at a given time. "Natural" developments such as further industrialization of the country will help the village somewhat. However, Dore believes, rather than proves, that the farmers will get less and less, "except—and this is an important exception—insofar as political and social policy considerations take precedence over economic arguments" (p. 269). It is indeed an important exception, and so long as conservative governments vie with the socialists for the credit of having fathered the reform, something to which the conservatives are not entitled, the chances are that political and social considerations will continue to have primacy over those of a purely economic nature.

Excellent, informative and rich in content though the book is, it is not without blemishes. It suffers from an abundance of riches of a type best eschewed. It is overwritten. Paragraphs can be reduced to sentences, and the reading can be difficult particularly for the uninitiated. It appears to this reviewer that Dore has become all too imbued with a certain tradition of the academe, which, when carried to great lengths, as he does, can be something of a bore. I have reference to a kind of judiciousness which obfuscates rather than enlightens. It is likely to leave the reader guessing what the author is about. On occasions, too, Dore is given to questionable

statements not supported by the contents of his book.

He readily recognizes the great levelling effects of the land reform. Yet in concluding his chapter "Levels and standards of living" he has this to say: "The present [economic structure] is one of infinite gradations, but in economic terms, the poles are not much closer together" (p. 240), that is, not much closer than in the pre-reform days. Economic egalitarianism was not the aim of the reform, and differences between farmers naturally exist. But it is equally true—Dore's book leaves no doubt about this—that the reform sharply reduced the economic differences formerly prevailing in the Japanese village. If, on the other hand, one compares the richest farmer with the poorest, the poles are indeed not much closer together.

Dore's broad familiarity with the literature directly or indirectly relating to his subject is commendable. However, in an interesting chapter on "The hamlet, status, dependence, and class," he has this to say:

It was, as Tawney remarked apropos of the emergence of the yeoman farmer, not so much 'poverty, but the withering shadow cast by complete economic dependence' which blighted the growth of the independent human spirit in medieval England. And so in modern Japan (p. 371).

Tawney's remarks probably do apply to the sixteenth-century English village, but Dore's offhand "Amen!" in relation to the present-day Japanese village is a literary mannerism rather than a statement of fact. As Dore himself points out in this chapter, as well as in other parts of the book, one of the things the reform accomplished was the drastic loosening of the bonds of economic dependence. Considering also that this was accompanied by equally drastic changes—exceptions notwithstanding—in the narrowing of the 'social distance' in status, class and leadership (pp. 378-79), the author's equating of the English medieval village with the modern Japanese village is a source of great puzzlement indeed.

The fact that economic dependence still survives in no way minimizes the great breach in the cake of custom which has led to the present-day renaissance of the Japanese village. Within the grave limitations of a huge farm population and little land, the Japanese

village is flexing its muscles in an unprecedented manner. Land reform has given place to agrarian reform in general, which is to say that very little that goes into the making of a sounder farm economy and a better life is being neglected. Dore's study is replete with valuable information and analysis on this point. Granting that his reader may wish to discount some of his observations, he himself notes that "It would, however, have to be a very large discount to alter my general conclusion that the last ten years have seen a considerable increase in the sum of human happiness in Japanese villages" (p. xvii).

The very last two sentences of Dore's book provide a fitting answer to the dubious issue he raised when he cited Tawney. Speaking of the once-powerful farmer's unions which have lost their primary functions after implementation of the reform, he concludes on this note:

They [the unions] may find scope for many more [village] 'struggles' of a temporary and local nature, but at present there is no major national issue, no single crying injustice, sufficiently widespread for a 'struggle' on a national scale to provide the basis of a vigorous national organization.

And this, perhaps, is one of the most important effects of the land reform (p. 472).

Discussing some of the immediate effects of the reform, Dore writes: "Dispossession, the threat of dispossession and black-market rents are thus inevitable concomitants of the present system" (p. 193). It would take one too far afield to discuss all the aspects of this pregnant and misleading statement. I shall limit myself to saying that the statement is both true and largely untrue. True to the extent that, with a multitude of farmers involved and the demand for land ever high, evasion of the rental provision takes place; largely untrue because the greater part of the tenanted land, according to the sample cited

by Dore and others, is paid for in controlled rent. In the same connection, it is well to note that ninety per cent of the cultivated land of Japan is cultivated by owner-farmers.

"Dispossession" is an ugly word, and Dore uses it loosely. Here, too, as in the case of the black-market rents, it is partly true but largely wide of the mark. It is true that resident landlords, with a permissible holding rented out to other farmers, wish to take some of it back for personal cultivation or sale. Landlords are known to have repossessed such land, but as Dore himself points out, "for every case in which a landlord repossessed, there were four cases in which a landlord sold out to the tenant" (p. 194). Dore has good reason for believing that these figures are somewhat exaggerated. The fact remains, however, that since the execution of the reform there has been a decided trend to sell land which the landlords are permitted to hold under the reform.

There is dispossession but this is not where the accent lies, and there is enough in Dore's account to make this clear. The flaw of the book lies in wanting to explain everything, in being buttressed, even if only occasionally, by an intemperate use of language which mars an otherwise significant contribution to our knowledge of a truly important development.

This reviewer regrets that the book does not contain a final summary chapter. Here and there Dore offers chapter-summaries. But the book is long and involved and it would have benefited from such an addition, particularly if accompanied by greater brevity in some of the preceding chapters.

These are some of the chinks in the author's armor. They are regrettable, but they hardly impair the over-all value of a timely, indispensable, and well-done study of Japan's agrarian revolution.

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