

The Agrarian Question in Korea

IN KOREA, as in other occupation areas, we have recognized the existence of an agrarian land question of momentous proportions but the American occupation authorities have done nothing fundamental about it. There, as elsewhere, we take the position that this is a domestic problem which must be solved by the nationals concerned. From a political viewpoint this may be laudable; from an economic viewpoint, it is unrealistic. At the very least we should have undertaken re-education in economic democracy.

The land tenure problem in South Korean agriculture is discussed by George M. McCune of the Department of History of the University of California in "The Occupation of Korea" (*Foreign Policy Reports*, Oct. 15, 1947, p. 191). Mr. McCune served, during the war, in the Office of Strategic Services and at the Korea desk in the State Department. He says:

Landlordism has been encouraged by the Japanese, partly as a means of grain collection. Tenancy had greatly increased, so that about 75 per cent of the rice lands of South Korea were tenant-operated. (Under Japanese control over 50 per cent of the crops were collected as rent.) By one Military Government ordinance (Oct. 5, 1945), rental rates were limited to one-third of the natural crops and by another (Dec. 6, 1945) titles to all Japanese-owned property (which comprised 12.5 per cent of the total cultivated area) were vested in Military Government. Although various proposals had been made for a land-distribution program, no action was taken in the first two years of occupation. "It is the contention of Military Government, at present," stated a government report of April, 1947, "that it is a Korean problem of far-reaching consequences and should be formulated by the Korean Government. Assembly action should do much to alleviate the oppressive tenancy conditions and to stabilize Korea's agricultural economy." (The Interim Legislative Assembly discussed the agrarian reform problem at great length but did not reach any decision.) Whatever the cause, "oppressive tenancy conditions" prevail under Military Government, and are not being effectively alleviated by appropriate reform measures.

Mr. McCune makes it clear that we have lost a remarkable opportunity, for in North Korea, after distributing 2,450,000 acres of land to 725,000 landless farmers and small holders, the Soviet authorities installed the Communist system of "taxes." They obliged the farmer to give up as much as half his crop, roughly equal to what he had paid under Japanese tenancy, to the State. A land tenure system based on justice and equality of opportunity would have been powerful propaganda for the democratic cause, as well as a sound basis for Korean reconstruction.