

“*Erbhofgesetz*” in Manchukuo: A case study of the acceptance of Nazi agricultural ideology by the Japanese Empire

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Introduction

On 13 November 1941, the Reclamation Farm Law (RFL=*Kaitakunôjohô* 開拓農場法) was proclaimed in Manchukuo 満洲国. Manchukuo was officially a “symbiotic” utopia for Asian peoples but was actually a puppet state built on 1 March 1932 by the Japanese Empire. The Empire had already forced about one hundred thousand poor peasants and young boys to move from Japan to various areas in Manchukuo. The law was drafted in order to protect them. What must be noted is that this was modelled on the Reich Hereditary Farm Law (*Reichserbhofgesetz*=REG), proclaimed on 1 October 1933, in Nazi Germany. Little attention has been given to such an influence as well as to the RFL in itself. This paper will consider why the Japanese Empire needed the RFL in Manchukuo and how they modelled it after the REG.

1. The policy of emigration to Manchukuo: the Divided Village System

The emigration policy started in 1932. It was called “armed emigration 武装移民”, and the purpose was to keep the peace. Not only was Manchukuo bordered on the north by the Soviet Union, but many “bandits 匪賊” from poor peasant villages also often put up resistance to Japanese colonizers. Therefore, the government tried to increase the percentage of Japanese in Manchukuo. It couldn’t stop the whole resistance, but the safety of the state improved little by little.

Four years later, the Japanese government arranged a new emigration plan. On 25 August 1936, the Prime Minister, Hirota Kouki 広田弘毅 (1878-1948), announced the plan to emigrate one million Japanese families (about five million people) from Japan to Manchukuo over twenty years. The fields had already been cultivated by Chinese and Korean farmers, but it was bought at an extremely low price by the Manchuria Colonial Public Corporation 満洲拓殖公社 or a sector of the government of Manchukuo. A new purpose was added to the plan: to solve poverty in Japanese villages. After the Great Depression in October of 1929, the degree of poverty had worsened. The Rural Economic Reform Movement 農山漁村経済更生運動, which the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry had started in October of 1932, wasn’t able to achieve great success. The basic thought of the bureaucratic movement was “self-help”. But a number of poor peasants and poor villages didn’t have enough energy to reform their economy.

Therefore, the Japanese government decided to improve the basic agricultural

structure by moving families from the overpopulated rural areas of Japan to Manchukuo. In 1937, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry estimated that the proper size of land per farmer in Japan (except *Hokkaido*, where relatively larger-scale farms were) was 1.6 ha/ 4 acres. However, the average scale, excepting *Hokkaido*, was, in fact, 0.9 ha/ 2.3 acres. The Ministry thus estimated there to be about 31% overpopulation (Kobayashi 1977: 84). As one of the solutions to this overpopulation problem, the Divided Village System (分村移民 *Bunson Imin*) was executed throughout the country. The system was simple: half the people from a village left the homeland for Manchukuo while the other half remained in the village to expand their estates. From the view of the government, the head village and its branch were connected as deeply as Japan and Manchukuo.

Eventually, approximately 300 thousand people went over to the “utopia”. However, the policy suffered a setback. First, after the Soviet Union invaded Manchukuo, Manchukuo collapsed in August 1945, and many colonizers, including children, died during their escape journey to the homeland. Second, the amount of applicants dropped during the 1940s. The war industry boomed and businesses improved. These circumstances didn’t provide much motivation to go over to Manchukuo. In some villages, applicants were forcibly chosen by the local government. That’s why, as many historians have insisted, the policy “threw away” overpopulation into Manchukuo. Many of these problems stemmed from the fact that the rural policy was established by city people rather than rural people.

2. The Reclamation Farm Law: Blood and Soil in Manchukuo

Nevertheless, the “idea” of the emigration policy is important for considering why the Japanese Empire would mobilize so many farmers from 1932 to 1945. David Renton is correct when he says, “fascism was an urban movement first and foremost, and not predominantly rural. Peasantism only played a role as a mobilizing discourse” (Renton 2001: 143). In my opinion, the image of the “peasant utopia” of Manchukuo, which was fully embodied in the RFL, played an important role in mobilizing Japanese farmers. Although the farmers’ motivation for emigrating from the homeland to Manchukuo didn’t increase much after 1940, nonetheless, most colonizers didn’t strongly offer opposition. One of the reasons is that the image of the “peasant utopia” or “anti-capitalism” reflected the spirit of the age. Since the Great Depression had sharply lowered the price of agricultural produce, especially of a cocoon, the income of most peasants went down so drastically that they became poor.

Actually, as Manchukuo was an icon of an anti-capitalistic “utopia”, the RFL was

idealistic and utopian. Such agricultural ideas were incorporated into the Law. The Law had no preamble, but this fundamental principle was written in Article 1: “The purpose of this law is to establish the basis of firm management by the inherited estate of reclamation farm and hence to create sound family farms as well as villages based on the farms.” Therefore, it was forbidden under Articles 36 and 37 to execute and sell any inherited estate of a reclamation farm. This limited ownership, the most important condition for capitalism, was for the purpose of protecting the new farms from a market mechanism. Additionally, according to Article 2, the reclamation farmers belonged to the “reclamation corps” (開拓団) or “reclamation cooperative” (開拓協同組合). The reclamation corps would change its name to the reclamation cooperative when the members made self-management possible.

Thus, the Law indicated a “third way”, which denied both capitalism and communism. In those days, the National Socialists’ anti-capitalism ideology and policies, as well as those of anti-communism, were enthusiastically introduced to Japan, by many agronomists and ruralists in particular, after Japan concluded the Anti-Comintern Pact with Nazi Germany on 25 November 1936. (In this pact, Germany agreed to recognize Manchukuo.) The REG, announced on 1 October 1933, was one of the most important acceptances of National Socialism by the Japanese Empire.

The Nazis’ REG, as well, prohibited the execution, buying and selling of land estate and guaranteed a single heir to farm property. Neither the REG nor the RFL regarded land estate as saleable goods. Both thought of land estate as a basis not only for corn production as a national (or imperialistic) self-sufficient policy but also for developing their peasants, their villages and finally their country. Moreover, it was important for both laws that a working family farm was at the core of developing the new country. Such an ideology can be seen as a kind of peasantism. Richard Walther Darré (1895-1953), who advocated the *Erbhof* ideology in Nazi Germany, insisted that the German peasant (*Bauer*) was *Neuadel* (new aristocracy). In other words, from Darré’s perspective, an agricultural manager who didn’t perform his physical labour was not *Neuadel* but *Landwirt* (a farmer). In short, one can safely state that the RFL was also deeply rooted in Darré’s ideology. Incidentally, Darré’s main published work, “*Neuadel aus Blut und Boden* (New aristocracy of Blood and Soil)” (1930), was translated into Japanese in January of 1941.

Thus, it appears that Manchukuo was an experimental station for both Japanese and German peasantism.

3. The differences between Reclamation Farm Law and *Reichserbhofgesetz*

The draft makers of the RFL didn't want to simply imitate the REG. On the contrary, they tried to overcome not only the REG but also the peasantism of Darré.

Therefore, it is helpful to quote from Ono Takeo 小野武夫 (1883-1949), an agricultural historian and one of the draft makers of the law (Ono 1943: 234):

The REG only tried to maintain the life of an independent farmer or the land estate of pure German people. In contrast, the important character of the RFL is not only organic development between family, land estate and village, but also eternal village construction, based on the spirit of the law. The character is also different from the hereditary laws of Eastern Countries. Protection of private property was the only purpose of the laws. Furthermore, the RFL doesn't adopt the Soviet Union's standpoint that denied private property such as Kolkhoz and Sovhoz. We may say that it is re-establishment of the pure Japanese social system. Especially, the statement that the reclamation farms should be established around *Shinto* shrine (神社) embodies the character of a Japanese village most clearly.

The last sentence is no exaggeration. According to Article 48, either the reclamation corps or the reclamation cooperative would secure their land estate for the *Shinto* shrine and village common.

Is Ono's statement reactionary? Surely Ono's somewhat fanatic assertion seems to have a reactionary tendency, but we shouldn't overlook that he tried to say the law would overcome both the modernity of Western countries and the communism of the Soviet Union. For Ono, even the REG was still quite Western and individualistic. Generally speaking—not only for Ono, but for most Japanese in those days—National Socialism was still bound up in Eurocentrism.

Kawashima Takeyoshi 川島武宜 (1909-1992), the youngest draft maker (32 years old at the time), also insisted on the legal uniqueness of the RFL. In those days, he was an assistant professor in the law department at the Imperial University of Tokyo. In his paper "Outline of the RFL" (1942), he mentions that under the RFL, any land estate was state owned (Kawashima 1942a: 14). His interpretation is quite different from that of Ono. In another paper (1942), Kawashima explains that the RFL regarded the family farm as a "corporation". In this case, the idea of family was completely different from that of the REG and civil law (Kawashima 1942b: 92).

To sum up, Kawashima thought of the core idea of the RFL as collectivism based on familism. From the viewpoint of Kawashima, the most important Nazi slogan, "*Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community)", was more clearly embodied in the RFL than

in the REG.

Although the interpretation by Kawashima differed from that of Ono, especially on the point of the communist character of the RFL, it must be noted that there was agreement regarding the superiority of the RFL to the REG.

What does this common point mean? In my opinion, it reflects the difference between Germany and Japan. Germany was much smaller with regards to the population of those working in rural areas than was Japan (Fig.1). Not only was the rate of birth higher in Japan than in Germany, but also the rate of death in Japan was lower than that of Germany (Fig.2). Therefore, the rate of natural population increase (A-B) for Japan was over two times higher than for Germany. Furthermore, the percentage of small size farms under 2 ha in Japan was 1.5 times higher than that in Germany, although we should notice the difference in productivity between the paddy field and the wheat or rye field.

Fig.1 The rate of workers of agriculture, forestry and fishery (%)

Country	Rate of workers	Year
Japan	49.5	1930
Great Britain	6.6	1931
France	36.5	1931
Germany	28.9	1933
U.S.A	22.0	1930

Source: Sugino(1940:214-215)

Fig.2 The rate of birth and death(‰)

Country	The rate of birth(A)	The rate of death(B)	(A)-(B)	Year
Japan	33.6	19.4	14.2	1925-30
Great Britain	17.8	11.7	6.1	1921-31
France	18.1	16.8	1.3	1926-31
Germany	17.6	11.6	6.0	1925-33
U.S.A	16.8	9.5	7.3	1920-30

Source: Sugino(1940:214-215)

Fig.3 The component ratio of farm size (%)

Country	Small size	Middle size	Large size	Year
Japan	89.5 (under 2 ha)	8.9 (2-5 ha)	1.6 (more than 5 ha)	1921
Great Britain	19.3 (under 2 ha)	46.3 (2-20 ha)	34.4 (more than 20 ha)	1923
Germany	59.4 (under 2 ha)	36.3 (2-20 ha)	4 (more than 20 ha)	1925
U.S.A	10.8 (under 8 ha)	46.2 (8-40 ha)	43 (more than 40 ha)	1920

Source: Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich (1932: 50), Wlwoytinskz (1926: 102-103)

This is why the Japanese Empire demanded a more rapid and radical reform to rural construction than did Western countries, including Nazi Germany. The gap made it possible to develop the hyper-modern idea of regarding a family farm as a corporation, for example, and the rapid progress of Japanese food-breeding technology based on the Mendel's Law in the first half of the 20th Century. This technology, especially rice breeding technology, has an affinity for farmers of small-sized farms. Accordingly, it is not too far from the truth to say that the speed and uniqueness of the rural reform process was one of the important reasons why the peasantism of the Japanese Empire succeeded in mobilizing the farmers into the fascistic regime.

4. Common questions from the organizer of our session

(1) Continuity and change in relation to former and following regimes

Before Manchukuo was established by Japan, there had been no idea of modern ownership in the Republic of China. Thus, the RFL was a kind of appeal to Japanese legal "superiority" over the Republic of China. And there was no continuity between the RFL and the agricultural land act of the People's Republic of China.

If we consider how the continuity of the peasantism reflected in the RFL between before and after WWII, we may not, in passing, that after the war, Kawashima Takeyoshi came to play an active role as a famous enlightenment legalist. He often insisted that familism had been a hotbed of fascism and the *Tenno* system. We may perhaps say that he is similar to a *Sonderweg* (special way) historian in Germany. At any rate, his attitude towards the idea of "family" completely changed after WWII.

(2) Conflicts with practical needs

In this respect, one may notice that, as former studies have often pointed out, it was quite impossible to manage 10 ha (the standard size per reclamation farm decided by the Manchukuo government) without employment. Thus, reclamation farmers had to pay a great deal of labour wages to Korean and Chinese peasants. The situation wasn't suited to the ideal of the RFL. Only after introducing to the reclamation farmers the new agricultural method of using a horse with a plough and harrow in 1941 did things

take a turn for the better. The method was called “*Hokkaido* agricultural method 北海道農法”, because such a method had been already prevailed to some extent in *Hokkaido*. However, four years, from this introduction of the method to the end of the war, were too short for the new method to achieve effective results.

(3) Prevailing attitudes within the rural society before the policy

There are few materials that indicate such attitudes. As Daniela Münkkel notes (1996), there are a lot of materials reporting farmers’ discontent with the REG, especially because they couldn’t borrow money on their land estate for investments in fertilizer and machinery. In contrast, it seems that the Manchuria Colonial Public Corporation accommodated the colonizers in Manchukuo with a loan at relatively low interest.

(4) Inter-influences among regimes

As we have seen, the RFL was modelled on the REG. Besides this influence, many books and papers about Nazi agricultural policy and thought were published in Japan.

As well, the Japanese government considered making a hereditary law, such as the one in the REG, for homeland, but no such law was ever realized. The reason was simple: most Japanese villages already were influenced by market mechanism and for a long time had been regarded as salable goods. In this sense, too, Manchukuo was an experimental station for the Japanese Empire.

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