

Root of the Japanese Imperialism and Agrarian Reform

A Report on the Workshop

“War, Violence, Restoration: Lessons learned through the past
projecting to the present and future”

November 26th, 2005

by

Shiori Tamura (Faculty of Law, Thammasat University)

Statement of Prime Minister Murayama (1995)

10 years ago, in the year of the 50th Anniversary of the End of World War II, the House of Representatives of Japan passed a special resolution and declared in it; “... *Remembering colonialism and aggression in the recent history of the world, we regard pains which the people in other countries, especially those of Asian nations had to suffer from such acts of our country. We sincerely express herein our deep regret for them ...*”. On the day of the surrender in the same year, Prime Minister Murayama announced an official statement and amplified the intention of this resolution more clearly; “... *During a certain period in the not too distant past, Japan, following a mistaken national policy, advanced along the road to war, only to ensnare the Japanese people in a fateful crisis, and through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. In the hope that no such mistake be made in the future, I regard, in a spirit of humility, these irrefutable facts of history, and express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and state my heartfelt apology. Allow me also to express my feelings of profound mourning for all victims, both at home and abroad, of that history ...*”.

10 years have already passed since that time. But, I must wonder to myself; have we seen any easing of the strained international relations between the former victim nations and Japan in these years? Unfortunately, our answer is “No”. The current Japanese government is probably of the opinion that this issue has been completely cleared with the special resolution and statement in 1995. I guess so because the Japanese government has ceased to show its sincerity to accept any criticism from Chinese and Korean governments especially regarding the “Yasukuni-Shinto-Shrine” and “Schoolbook-Screening” issues. Is this an arrogance of the Japanese people, or even a symptom of a “Rise of New Imperialism” in Japan?

Discrepancy regarding Understanding of the History

Behind this conflict between the former victim nations and the aggressor, we can recognize an almost unrecoverable discrepancy regarding understanding of the history. The people of the victim nations see simply a “rise of another imperialism” in the development of the Japanese society since the middle of 19. c. while the majority of the Japanese understand their own modern history as a result of inevitable fatality, in other words, a “struggle for survival” in the age of colonialism. In their sight, they themselves were “victims of the history”. Of course, they would not deny the cruelty of the Japanese aggression during the war, but strangely enough, they do not suffer from any painful guilty conscience as wrongdoers or offenders. The inscription on the monument in the Peace Memorial Park of Hiroshima would symbolize this typically Japanese historical consciousness of the

Postwar period; *“Let all the souls here rest in peace. We shall not repeat the evil”*. *“We shall not repeat the fault”* in the original Japanese word. Anyway, what was the evil or fault, the aggressive invasion or the atomic bombardment? And whose fault was it, of the Emperor, the commandants of the Imperial Army and Navy, or American President Truman? Nothing is clear. It is rather a sobbing confession of a “lost sheep”. The majority of the Japanese believes that all the killed or injured people in Asian countries and fallen soldiers were victims of the fearful storm of international politics. In such a perception, also the executed war criminals were not exceptions of the *“victims of the history”*. Some Japanese politicians are firmly convinced that the existence of the *“Yasukuni-Shinto-Shrine”* is completely justifiable from this perception.

Fundamental Questions

However, which is a correct understanding of the Japanese modern history, a “rise of another imperialism” or a “struggle for survival”? We have now reached the fundamental questions over the political and social development of Japan since the middle of the 19. c.;

1. Mr. *Murayama* spoke of *“a mistaken national policy”* in his official statement. To exactly say, *what was the fatal mistake of Japan?*
2. *Was the “Japanese Imperialism” really an “inevitable fatality”, or probably avoidable?*
3. *And what was a real reason or the root of the “Japanese Imperialism”?*

Postwar Reforms under the Occupation

Before we go into these difficult questions, I would like to mention here another related question regarding the comprehensive postwar reforms which were implemented under the rule of the occupation powers, namely;

Which reform policy was the most effective one for the ultimate dissolution of the Japanese Imperialism?

On August 15th, 1945, Japan accepted the “Potsdam Proclamation” and surrendered without any condition. On August 30th, General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), arrived in Tokyo. Since then, almost the whole political, economic and social structures underwent drastic change and democratization in accordance with the “Directives” from the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ).

The first tasks of GHQ were, of course, complete disarmament of Japan and prosecution of war criminals. In October 1945, GHQ issued a directive for the *“Five Basic Reforms”* toward total democratization of the Japanese society;

1. Emancipation of women
2. Legalization of labour unions
3. Democratization of education
4. Abolishment of political autocracy and repression system
5. Liberalization of economic system

Agrarian Reform

This was the beginning of the postwar reform under the occupation, but this directive did not include any specific order about emancipation of farming land. The Japanese government meanwhile began with the preparation for the own agrarian reform program. General MacArthur thereupon announced his “*Memorandum on Agrarian Reform*” on December 9th, 1945. In this statement, General MacArthur clarified his basic perception that *the feudalistic social structure in rural areas was just the root of the Japanese militarism*, and called for a final dissolution of the traditional tenant system of farming land. On December 18th, the Japanese Diet passed the so-called “*First Agrarian Reform Measures*”. GHQ, however, rejected it and demanded more radical measures. On October 8th, 1946, the Japanese Diet passed the so-called “*Second Agrarian Reform Measures*” with consent of GHQ;

1. Prohibition of landownership for absentee landlords and rigid limitation of tenanted land for farming landlords (maximal 2.45 acres in the mainland, 9.8 acres in Hokkaido)
2. Compulsory acquisition of tenanted land by the state and its distribution to former tenant farmers (up to 7.5 acres for each farming household)
3. Restriction of tenancy rent and prohibition of rent paid in kind
4. Contract in writing as a requirement for remaining tenancy relations

This reform was rapidly implemented and accomplished in 1950. Social relations in Japanese rural areas were dramatically changed. The “landlords” who had dominated farming communities since the Shogunate Regime, disappeared suddenly. In my sight, this reform could perform a more immediate and effective impact for the improvement of life style and mentality under the majority of the Japanese than other political or economic reform measures. Moreover, it was a fundamental adjustment to the modern Japanese history since the second half of the 19. c. In order to prove my opinion, I would like to go back to the starting point of the modernization under the rule of Meiji Regime and follow the establishment of the Japanese Imperialism.

Land Tax Reform in 1871

After the defeat of the Shogunate Regime in 1868, one of the most important measures for the modernization was the introduction of the modern legal concept of landownership. In 1871, the new government under the rule of Meiji Emperor issued the certificate of land title and officially determined the land price for each region as basis for the new land tax system. In this reform, so-called “Land Tax Reform”, the Meiji Regime granted the landownership to the former landlords and legitimated the tenancy farming system from the feudal period. Accordingly, economic conditions of the Japanese farmers became rather worse than improved under the new regime. *THIS IS THE INITIAL MISTAKE OF JAPAN* in my sight. Tenant farmers, that is the majority of the population, had to suffer from a double exploitation, namely land tax ($\geq 30\%$) and tenant rent ($\geq 30\%$). For the Meiji Regime, land tax collected from tenant farmers was the main financial resources for its modernization and industrialization policy.

Popular Movement for Freedom and Democracy (1870s -)

Groaning under a heavy burden of land tax, poor farmers began to join together and

initiated a nationwide protest movement against the government. Sometimes, it escalated into a bloody collision with the police forces. Moreover, another social group took sides with rebellious farmers, namely former Samurai-warriors who could not enjoy any opportunity under the new regime. They together set up a so-called “*Popular Movement for Freedom and Democracy*” and founded *political parties*. They demanded a constitution, a parliament, and voting rights. Meiji government tried every suppression measure against this democracy movement, but unsuccessfully. The regime fell into a serious crisis.

Countermeasures against Political Parties

In 1881, Meiji Emperor officially promised the promulgation of a constitution and the convening of a national assembly within a decade. The government started then to develop a system of countermeasures against possible influence from political parties in a coming parliament:

1. Establishment of supreme decision-making organs (Cabinet, New Peer, Privy Council) outside of constitution
2. Separation of supreme command and military affairs from conventional political affairs
3. Establishment of supervision and direct control over the population exercised by Imperial Army and Navy (National Shintoism, ideological education and military training in school)

With these measures, the government strived to purge political parties from the decision-making process. *THIS IS THE SECOND MISTAKE OF JAPAN* in my sight.

Limited Competence of Prime Minister

But, who should exercise the real decision-making power? Just on this question, the governmental leaders were split into two groups, namely Realists and Extremists. The Realists pursued a strong leadership of Prime Minister and tried to detach the Emperor from real politics while the Extremists dreamed of the Emperor as a heroic figure in real politics. This dispute inside the government could not be settled down. Finally, the Realists had to give away a leading position of Prime Minister. Accordingly, the possibility of Emperor's intervention in politics became more likely. So, the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (1889) possessed only Article 55 on Ministers of State and nothing about Prime Minister and Cabinet. As a result, the predictive power of Prime Minister over his Cabinet had to be very limited. Later in 1890s, the Emperor deprived Prime Minister of the competence to appoint Ministers of the Imperial Army and Navy in return to his permission for the first party cabinet in Japan. Together with the Articles on the Imperial Prerogatives and Supreme Command, *an extraordinary tight connection between the Emperor and Imperial Army and Navy* was hereby established just outside of the constitutional democracy. Even Prime Minister could not argue against both military ministers. *THIS IS THE THIRD MISTAKE OF JAPAN* in my sight. Until the beginning of the 20th century, *a totalitarian power structure* from the Emperor down to the common people through the Imperial Army and Navy was accomplished.

Initial Stage of the Imperialism

In the international scene, the Meiji government had pushed an active diplomacy to

China and Korea from the initial stage of its rule. In 1874, Japan sent troops to Taiwan. In 1876, Japan forced Korea to conclude an unequal treaty of commerce and began with political intervention in Korean internal affairs. In 1879, Japan annexed the Kingdom of Ryukyu. However, confronted by the nationwide escalation of violence under the population (Popular Movement for Freedom and Democracy), this active diplomacy probably gained another motive force, namely to pursue economic opportunities for the poorest segment of the population in order to cool down their violent actions. As a matter of facts, new political leaders of the democracy movement never protested against such aggressive diplomacy of the government, they rather claimed to exercise more powerful pressure to China and Korea. *THIS IS ANOTHER MISTAKE ON THE SIDE OF THE DEMOCRATIC WING.* In 1888, backed up by the support from political parties, the government decided to reorganize the whole Imperial Army and Navy for foreign expedition. When the first session of the Imperial Diet was convened in 1890, Japan was ready to start an aggressive war against China.

Second Stage of the Imperialism

After the Sino Japanese War (1894 - 95) and the colonization of Taiwan, Japanese Imperialism entered its second stage. In 1898, the Emperor permitted the formation of the first party cabinet which represented the interests of the landlords, in return, this cabinet boosted the military spending with consent of the Diet. *The Cabinet, the Diet, the Imperial Court, and the Imperial Army and Navy, they all banded together and prepared for the next war against Russia.* After the Russo Japanese War (1904 - 05), Japan completely annexed Korea. *THESE ALL WERE, of course, THE FOURTH MISTAKE OF JAPAN.* At this point, the initial expansion policy planned by the Meiji Regime was accomplished. In parallel to this development, the parliamentary cabinet system was established as unwritten law, and common people began to claim universal suffrage. After the World War I, Japan entered the ranks of industrial nations, and industry workers began to organize themselves. The Japanese people enjoyed, so to say, a short period of “*Indian Summer of Democracy*” until “*Black Monday*” in 1929.

Coincidence of Democracy and Imperialism

When we take a look back on the Japanese history from 1870s to 1920s, we find a bizarre and complex development of Democracy and Imperialism. They were tightly coincided each other from the beginning of the modernization. The Japanese experienced these 50 years as a period of “*Progress to Constitutional Democracy*” while the neighbouring nations could recognize only a “*Rise of Japanese Imperialism*”.

Final Stage of the Imperialism

The “*Great Depression*” in 1929, however, brought an end to the time of Constitutional Democracy in Japan. Already soon after the World War I, the Imperial Army in Korea and North China (Manchuria) had begun to arbitrarily perform military activities without consultation to the government. In 1931, the Imperial Army suddenly occupied Manchuria and established a puppet-state “*Manchukuo*”. Showa Emperor (*Hirohito*), however, authorized this military ambition. The Japanese government lost completely its control over the Imperial Army. On May 15th, 1932, Prime Minister *Inukai* was assassinated during the

attempted coup by the extremist officers of the Imperial Navy. The party cabinet fell down. The Emperor assigned a military cabinet. The Japanese Imperialism entered hereby its third and last stage. In the following years, all the constitutional institutions ceased to work. Instead, a monstrous war machine of that totalitarian power structure ruled everything in Japan. THESE ALL WERE FATAL ERRORS OF JAPAN. And further numerous errors followed until the atomic bombardment in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Dissolution of the Imperialism

After the disarmament and the destruction of the totalitarian power structure under the rule of the occupation powers, the constitutional democracy of Japan came back to life, and a peace-loving regime could be rapidly established. But, the initial mistake of Japan was that “Land Tax Reform” in 1871. Accordingly, the end of the Japanese Imperialism had to be set with the “Agrarian Reform” in 1948 - 50. During the time of the Imperialism, the poverty problem of the Japanese tenant farmers had continuously worsened, and their protest movement against the government could never be suppressed until the military regime took over the political power. Through the “Agrarian Reform” after the defeat of the Japanese Imperialism, the peaceful life in rural areas was finally restored. They had never to send their sons to any aggressive war more, and we will never repeat these fatal errors in the modern history of Japan again.

Now, to the closing words of this speech; *Internal peace is the best contribution to international peace.*

Estimated Numbers of Victims during the War in Asian Region

China	at least	10,000,000
Korea	at least	200,000
Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia	at least	2,000,000
Indonesia	at least	2,000,000
Philippine	at least	1,000,000
India	at least	3,500,000
Malaysia, Singapore	at least	5,000
Myanmar	at least	50,000
New Zealand		11,625
Thailand		unknown
Maldives		unknown
Polynesian islands		unknown
Sakhalin, Kuril islands		unknown
---		---
	Total	at least 18,820,000
Japan	at least	2,565,878