

Periphery Resources and Land Reform: The Case of Japan

Keywords: Land reform, Japan, natural resources, resource conflict

Introduction

Over 50 years have passed since an occupied Japan executed its post-war land reform. This reform was aimed at removing inequalities in rural Japan on the basis of land ownership, thereby removing one of the historically most powerful sources of rural unrest in Japan and helping to pave the way for the introduction of democracy in that country. Political motivations of the state dominated the land reforms; the need to integrate Japan's population into the Western bloc of powers during the formative years of the Cold War proved was a primary objective of the Allied Occupation.

Achievements of the Land Reform

Japan's land reform is often seen as one of the finest achievements of the Occupation. Around one third of Japan's total cultivated land was bought by the government from landlords and redistributed to former tenants. The position of the tenant was historically an economically and socially insecure one, and tenancy the chief cause of rural poverty in Japan. Around 2.7 million new owners of farmland were created, and legal mechanisms to prevent their falling back into tenancy were set in place.

Moreover, this was carried out in just a matter of years, with democratically elected Land Committees performing the actual work of redistribution across Japan.

Current Research Objective

Despite these successes, there were a number of cases in which the objectives of the land reform were undermined by interference arising from natural resource conflicts, peripheral to farmland and not the object of redistributive policies or programs.

This research seeks firstly to systematically identify the causes and subsequent effects of these conflicts involving periphery resources.

Secondly, it attempts to outline why Japanese land reform, in terms of legislation and its execution, created environments in which these conflicts could occur, and to what extent these events undermined the objectives of the land reform, such as the introduction of democratic governance, or the progress of the land reform itself.

Some broad lessons concerning the role of such periphery resources in the execution of land reforms are elicited.

Methodology

Detailed primary documents

dealing with conflicts during the execution of the land reform and involving three natural resources, forests, coal and water, are employed here in reconstructing each case study. Most of the literature concerning Japan's land reform tends to approach the subject from a macro-level 'before-and-after' perspective. This thesis focuses primarily on the specific process that accompanied the reform. Furthermore, the case studies dealt with here have not been sufficiently dealt with in the literature.

Key Conclusions

Some of the key conclusions from this research can be broadly summarized.

While individuals stand to benefit from land reforms, not everybody benefits equally, nor do they benefit in the same ways. This is because:

- Land reforms are motivated primarily by the political objectives of the state or governing authorities;
- Thus, land reform programs reflect the ways in which the state views the land, its people and natural resources, which often collapses broad and complex populations and ecologies into simple categories;
- These categories can not account for locally unique interplays between people, land and resources, which are disrupted by redistributive programs based on national or regional average conditions, such as land reforms.

- Finally, the execution of land reforms, where the redistribution of land on which successful cultivation is significantly dependent on strategically important natural resources (that is, from the perspective of the state), is apt to clash with other policy priorities. This in turn may require extraordinary measures on behalf of the state to settle any disputes that may arise.

It may be naive to expect land reform policy to enable redistribution that is truly meaningful in terms of taking into account those natural resources apart from farmland. However, this thesis also suggests that assessing land reforms specifically from the perspective of periphery resources may provide another perspective on top-down redistribution.