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LAND REDISTRIBUTION SCHEMES IN TOKUGAWA JAPAN

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This paper explores a neglected aspect of village control over land and one of the major variants in Tokugawa landholding patterns, the practice of village ownership and periodic redistribution among peasants of arable land. The widespread existence of this practice raises several important questions. I shall touch upon only two here. First, the existence of this pattern of village control over arable land clearly indicates that contrary to common conceptions, very diverse Tokugawa landholding patterns confronted planners of the mid-19th century Meiji land tax reforms. A brief description of land redistribution procedures helps to clarify how different from standard conceptions Tokugawa landholding practices could be.

Second, the conflict between the principles of private landownership embodied in the Meiji government's new land tax system and the principles of village ownership embodied in redistribution practices permits examination of the relationship between traditional village practices and the reforms of a modernizing state. The treatment of land redistribution practices in Niigata prefecture indicates that the Meiji government pursued a policy of accommodation. Accommodation there was so extensive that Tokugawa practices exerted influences well into the 20th century.

## Diversity in Tokugawa Landholding Patterns

Studies of landholding in late 16th to mid-19th century Japan have generally focused on the land surveys of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late 16th century and similar surveys conducted in the 17th century. Scholars argue that these surveys created a simple and direct relationship between the peasant "owner" and the land. Limited restrictions on the extent to which land could be subdivided and sold aside, landholding throughout the Tokugawa era is widely thought to have had most of the characteristics of modern landownership.<sup>1</sup> At minimum, this system created both a direct relationship between peasant and land and a direct relationship between the domain lord and the peasantry (sakuai hitei). This freed the peasant from the burden of sharing the fruits of his labor with any but the domain lord (sakuai hitei). Some scholars, such as Kozo Yamamura, go further and see in this new, direct relationship between peasant and land an increased incentive for the peasants to make agricultural investments to increase their income.<sup>2</sup>

Yet there is cause to reconsider this picture. As Hayami Akira queried, "If the surveys confirmed the peasant's possession of the land, why was it necessary for the Meiji government to confirm individual landownership at the time it enacted the land tax reform," in the mid-1870s?<sup>3</sup> Hayami's question, unanswered by Tokugawa specialists, has been recognized as important by students of the mid-19th century Meiji land tax reforms. Their work and that of others has made it clear that a variety of relationships between peasant and land existed by the mid-19th century.<sup>4</sup> Some of these had a history dating back to at least the early

17th century.

Warichi: Village Management and Redistribution of Land

One of the more radical variants in Tokugawa landholding patterns was the practice of periodically redistributing arable land among peasants holding superior rights to exploit village land. Redistribution was not a national practice, but it was widespread: its use is well documented in about one-third of Japan's provinces. In some of these provinces it may have been an exceptional practice, but in others, such as the five provinces that became modern Fukui, Ishikawa, Toyama, and Niigata prefectures (Echizen, Kaga, Noto, Etchu, and Echigo), it was the rule. In each region where redistribution practices were found, the name by which it went varied, but the most common name generally applied was warichi ("dividing the land").

Land redistribution practices were intimately related to the Tokugawa system of land taxation. During the Tokugawa era, land taxes were assessed on villages, not on individuals. Consequently, each village had to devise regulations for allocating portions of the tax to individual households. Furthermore, if one family could not bear its share of the taxes, domain authorities held the remaining taxpayers in the village responsible for the deficit. Village taxes and labor dues were also frequently based on land use rights. Therefore, it was reasonable that a number of villages and domains would try to find ways to assure that taxpayers, through debt or natural calamity, would not be forced out of agriculture and lost from the tax roles.

Land redistribution schemes were one means of accomplishing these dual objectives of 1) equitably distributing land taxes among taxpayers and 2) protecting individuals from the full consequences of natural disasters by sharing the costs of land lost from cultivation. Land redistribution helped promote equitable distribution of taxes by assuring that each taxpaying household held the same average quality of land. Once this was accomplished, taxes could be assessed uniformly on each unit of land (often, but not always, the assessed value or kokudaka). In some areas redistributions were conducted periodically for this reasons alone. In other areas, natural disasters stimulated redistributions on an irregular basis. After a flood or landslide destroyed arable land, the remaining village land would be redistributed so that each household held the same proportion of arable land as it had prior to the disaster and each paid the same proportion of the village's land tax. Thus, the primary objective of redistribution was to assure some measure of fairness in apportioning land taxes and unavoidable agricultural losses, and not to redistribute wealth within the village according to need or any similar criteria.

Actual practices of redistribution varied in detail throughout the country. In some cases, all arable land in a village was subject to redistribution. In others, there were important categories of land that were exempt. Some redistribution systems were implemented frequently, say every three to five years, while others operated infrequently, perhaps once every ten to 20 years.

Variations in redistribution practices reflect differences<sup>5</sup> in administrative policy at two levels, village and domain.

Some redistribution regulations were the creation of villagers as they dealt with the problems of determining which peasants should bear what part of the village's land tax burden, or how to deal with the loss of land due to natural disasters. In these regions, villagers determined what land was to be redistributed, how often, who was to participate, and through what precise mechanisms the redistribution was to be effected.

In other regions, domain administrations oversaw all or part of the redistribution process. In many instances the domain administration did little more than standardize common village practices. This was the case in the domain of Kaga. When authorities there intervened in redistribution, it was only 1) to assure that redistribution was implemented based on a consensus of participating villagers, 2) to mandate its use at least once every 20 years and 3) to certify the peasant surveyors who measured the arable land in preparation for its reallocation. In all other respects, villagers were to follow village customs which predated domain involvement by at least 30 - 40 years.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Case of Echigo

The following discussion focuses on land redistribution in Echigo. These practices were village based and while there was consequently much variation in detailed procedures, Echigo materials illustrate key features of Tokugawa land redistribution practices. They also provide a good opportunity to examine the relationship between these village customs and the Meiji state's efforts to implement its land tax system.

Like many examples of land redistribution, the precise origins of the practice in Echigo are not entirely clear. According to Echigo fudo kô and Onkô no shiori, the first redistributions were associated with 1612 land surveys of the Shibata domain. Decisions to utilize the warichi system were apparently part of village efforts to reduce intravillage quarrels that resulted from perceived inequities in the land tax burden following the domain's survey.<sup>7</sup>

Once established, land redistribution practices became a widespread, permanent feature throughout Echigo villages. Its use transcended domain boundaries, encompassing, for example, the Nagaoka and Mineyama domains as well as Shibata. No domain administration bothered to interfere with this village institution or to intentionally foster its development, yet redistribution practices remained an important part of village life until well after the Meiji land tax reforms.

At the heart of each redistribution were four operations. First, villagers had to draw up a document that specified the terms under which the redistribution was to be conducted. This document described which lands were to be exempted, measuring rod length, etc. In some cases, there are also clear indications in these contracts that tenants participated on the same basis as non-tenant peasants.<sup>8</sup> All participants signed this document.

Second, the land in the village had to be organized for redistribution. Land was divided into standard segments (ken mag)<sup>9</sup> which were of a convenient size and uniform soil quality. Then each segment was measured and its productivity evaluated. Each segment was identified somehow and its name written on a

bamboo stick or slip of paper to be drawn in the redistribution lottery.

Third, villagers with rights to land were organized into lottery groups (kuji kumi). At the time of the lottery, each group would draw one lot upon which a land segment's name was written. If one family held rights to enough land, that family alone could constitute a lottery group. If families held less land than the standard share (ken mae), the rights of several families would be combined into a standard unit and one of their number would represent the group in the lottery. The person who represented each lottery group was often referred to as the kuji  
10  
osa.

Finally, lands were allocated to lottery groups by drawing lots. Lots were drawn by kuji osa for segments of each quality and type of land. Lands thus assigned to lottery groups were  
11  
then allocated among constituent members. At the conclusion of the lottery, each participant held the rights to land that was composed of the same proportions of superior, good, and poor quality land as any other participant.

Although redistribution was a time consuming process, Echigo villages redistributed lands quite frequently. Rarely did the interval exceed 10 years. More often it was been between three  
12  
to eight, and a few villages rotated every year.

#### The Fate of Warichi Under the Meiji Land Tax Reforms

In July, 1873, the Meiji government issued the ordinances initiating its new land tax system. The new taxes were to be based on the value of land rather than its presumed yield. Fur-



thermore, the new tax system was to be based on the principle of individual, rather than village responsibility, for tax payment.

Orders to implement the new land tax system were received in Echigo (entirely encompassed by Niigata prefecture by 1876), too, but as in other areas that employed land redistribution (e.g., Kaga, Noto, Etchū, Echizen), the practices of village control of land and cooperative payment of land taxes continued for some

<sup>13</sup>  
time. Even in those villages in which private landownership was established, the customs governing landlord-tenant relations that were part of the redistribution system in Echigo continued in effect through the postwar era. Thus, officials altered the land tax reforms to accommodate local practices, easing their implementation and perhaps helping to keep peasant opposition to

<sup>14</sup>  
a minimum.

Although certificates of private land ownership were issued, redistribution continued in at least 239 villages.

<sup>15</sup>  
As late as 1928, one authority could count a dozen contemporary administrative districts (about 33 Tokugawa villages) in which redistribution

<sup>16</sup>  
still occurred. In exceptional cases, redistribution con-

<sup>17</sup>  
tinued well after the land reforms of the American occupation.

In these villages, residents continued to treat land taxes as a corporate responsibility well into the 20th century. In this way, the risks of natural disasters continued to be shared by

<sup>18</sup>  
residents in areas of frequent flooding.

Even where private landownership became established, redistribution practices exerted an influence on landlord-tenant relations. Under the warichi system in Tokugawa and Meiji times, tenants participated in the lotteries, and their rent was deter-

ained by corporate village decision, not by the whim of individual landlords. This process took into consideration the domain or national land taxes due, labor and taxes due to the village, and after the Meiji period, taxes due to the prefecture, in addition to some consideration for the landlord. This protection underlay pressures by tenants to continue to determine rent based on uniform rates per share of land cultivated by a tenant rather than on open market rates that reflected the productivity and value of a given piece of land. Landlords were by no means happy with this arrangement. One early 20th century landlord wrote in frustration, "Since tenants are allocated shares (kenmae) from among those of the entire village, it is difficult to record clearly in recordbooks which tenant is cultivating which land, and from the landlord's perspective, that in itself makes a landlords' overseeing of tenants unprofitable. On the other side, the weakening of the landlord's management to such an extent is profitable for the tenant who rents the share."<sup>19</sup>

#### Conclusions

As the preceding discussion makes clear, landholding patterns in Tokugawa Japan evidence substantial diversity. In contrast to common images of individual households holding a given plot of land until they transferred it to another, villages which practiced land redistribution held ultimate control over who held exploitation rights to a given field. In these villages, the peasant households which participated in redistributions were, in effect, shareholders in a village corporation. When they bought, sold or inherited taka, peasants were effectively transferring all

or part of their shares in this village corporation. They were not transferring rights to a specific piece of property.

The materials from Echigo also clearly indicate that while traditional village practices ultimately may have bent to the will of the modernizing state, the Meiji government was prone to accommodate local customs rather than to eradicate them heavily-handedly. Traditional practices showed a good deal of tenacity. Redistribution practices can be documented in more than 200 Echigo villages for decades after the enactment of the Meiji land tax reforms. Throughout this time, villages continued collective land tax payment. Even after a village conducted its last redistribution, customs associated with it long influenced landlord-tenant relations. In these regions, the farmers' desire to share the risks of natural disaster and to control rents combined to support Tokugawa patterns of village control over arable land well into the 20th century.

FOOTNOTES

1  
Araki, Ishii Shiro

2  
Yamamura, Kozo, "Returns on Unification. . . "

3  
Hayami Akira, Nihon ni okeru keizai shakai no tenkai,

Tokyo: Keio Tsushin, 1975, p. 78.

4  
E.g., Fukushima Masao, Chiso kaisei, p. 51-4; 103-9

5  
Aono

6  
Wakabayashi, Takazawa

7  
Aono, "Echigo . . ." p. 101

8  
Niigata ken ni okeru warichi seido, p. 64, provides one example. This practice became widespread by the 19th century, and as the discussion below indicates, the widespread participation of tenants had important implications for the continuation of redistribution and associated practices after the Meiji land tax reforms.

9  
These divisions could be changed from redistribution to redistribution. This practice permitted peasants to adjust to changes in village conditions.

10  
Selection of the kuji oya might be based on the size of his "holdings", tradition, social prestige, or other considerations, depending on village customs.

11  
The description presented here is quite general. For more detailed explanations of procedures and terminology, see Niigata ken ni okeru warichi seido, pps. 58-92.

12  
Niigata ken ni okeru warichi seido, pps. 93-8. For a large village, redistribution might take about one month. Because of this burden, sometimes, if there were not substantial

changes in the land, the units of the preceding redistribution were reallocated without measurement and evaluation of the soil (kujikai). See *ibid.*, p. 93, and Aono, p. 104.

13

Makino Shinnosuke, Buke . . . , pps.228-9, lists five documents from Echizen (Fukui prefecture) that deal with post Meiji tax reform use of redistribution. The last redistribution in territory formerly under the control of Naga domain occurred in 1895(?--source).

14

Niigata ken no rekishi, p. 217, indicates that the implementation of tax reforms evoked little opposition.

15

Aono, p. 105.

16

Niigata ken ni okeru warichi seido, pps. 236-9.

17

See Niigata ken nochi kaikaku shi shiryo, vol. 4, p. 157, 179, for documents related to the post-war redistribution system in Ishitsu village.

18

This is reflected even in the documents for post-war warichi cited in note 13.

19

Quoted in Aono, p. 108.