

Village Commons in Japan from the Moral Economy Perspective:
A Note on the Right to Subsistence of the Disadvantaged Villagers

Tadasu TSURUTA

Faculty of Agriculture, Kinki University

e-mail: tadasutsuruta@hotmail.com

Abstract

This paper tries to examine traditional village commons in Japan (*iriai-chi*) from the perspective of moral economy. Moral economy and commons are closely-related concepts, in that both ideas attach the greatest importance to communal and self-governing resource management system in each locality. According to James Scott, moral economy of Southeast Asian peasants was formerly based on “the right to subsistence” of village members (especially those in economic distress), who were entitled to use village commons to make a living. In a similar vein, Hiroyuki Torigoe, a pioneering environmental sociologist in Japan, emphasizes the need to analyze Japanese village commons from the viewpoint of “the right to life of the underprivileged.” Following the arguments of Scott and Torigoe, this paper argues that, historically, village commons in Japan including forests, rivers, and other types of common lands had provided an opportunity for the destitute families to survive in a variety of ways. The landless families or victims of a disaster were given priority rights over utilizing woods and other forest products, arable land, or fishing grounds that were held in common. At times of emergency such as a widespread famine or severe food shortage, village(or local government)-owned woodlands were used as the place to secure foods either by growing crops or gathering wild edible plants. Such a function of village commons as a safeguard against misfortunes, however, came to an end as modern Japanese government carried out several measures to appropriate these communal properties.

Key words: village commons, moral economy, the right to subsistence, *iriai*, Japan

1. Introduction: Commons and Moral Economy

The current global system of political economy seems to be failing to build up a sustainable society. Even in advanced countries, imminent collapse of national social security system, a widening gap between rich and poor, unreliable supply systems of food and energy, environmental degradation, all these are threatening economic and social well-being of the present and future generation. A devastating tsunami disaster in the northeastern Japan and ensuing Fukushima nuclear accident reminded us that how unstable and fragile base our civilization rests on. Nation-state and market economy are certainly not working in solving the problems. Rather, these two powerful institutions are making the situation even worse and people’s livelihood more insecure. It is in this context that one has to reconsider social

insurance systems based on each local community and its environs. From this vantage point, most noteworthy is the following two concepts; moral economy and commons, both of which refer to a sort of communal security system created by members of a particular community.

One of the important features of village commons across the world might be their protective functions for the needy families in a community. James Scott, one of the prominent advocates of the concept of moral economy, argues that one of the moral principles of Southeast Asian peasants was “the right to subsistence,” which guaranteed lives of the underprivileged, who may have been given priority to use village commons. Rights to farm or graze on unused village land, gleaning rights, and customary rule that a needy villager was given priority over access to farmland or wage labor, “all served the same end of enabling the village poor to scrape by” (Scott 1975: 43). Probably the concepts of commons and moral economy intersect with each other at this viewpoint of the right to subsistence.

Hiroyuki Torigoe, one of the leading environmental sociologists in Japan, argues that village commons should be viewed not only from its role as a mere resource management system (or the role in conserving environment), but also from the perspective of *jakusha-seikatsu-ken* or “the right to life of the underprivileged.” According to him, Japanese village commons has a double function; one is to provide all the village members necessary materials such as fuel woods and timber, and the other one is to provide social security to the poor. The poor (especially landless peasants) usually had priority rights over using common lands. Interestingly, he further argues that these priority rights are probably derived from uneven distribution of farmland among villagers. As shall be seen later, since all the land in the village domain (even private lands) is considered to be owned (or controlled) by the entire village as a group, those members who were allocated smaller farmlands should have the greater priority over using the common forest (or other resources), thus keeping a balance between the haves and have-nots (Torigoe 1997). Torigoe’s argument is thought-provoking, in that the right to subsistence is elucidated from the logic of ownership, rather than from villagers’ mere compassion. However, how this right was exercised in daily practice of villagers, and what sort of social system or value system lay behind this right, still remains to be explored.

Based on the existing historical and ethnographical studies, this paper aims at revealing the ways in which the right to subsistence is guaranteed by village commons, with particular reference to moral economy among villagers. The moral economy concept suggests us that social insurance system in a village community is not only based on a mere common property regime but also closely bound up with everyday social relations between villagers. In the light of Scott’s classic argument, they may include reciprocal relations between equals on the one hand, and between a patron (landowner) and clients (tenant farmers) on the other. At the same time, moral economy of villagers becomes tangible especially when a part (or all) of them are

plunged into a subsistence crisis. This paper also tries to examine not only how to allocate resources at ordinary times but also how to help others in an emergency or a crisis.

2. Japanese Village Commons and the Right to Subsistence

Japanese villagers had been regularly meeting their day-to-day requirements for survival by utilizing common forests, rivers, coasts and other jointly-owned/ controlled resources. Hillsides and forests, especially scrub or coppice areas and grasslands adjacent to village settlements, were particularly important as the place to collect fuel woods for domestic cooking and heating, leaf litter and grasses for fertilizer, and thatch grasses. Village commons in Japan has been marked by a unique system of communal resource management composed of a set of rights and regulations. Village common land was called *iriai-chi*, which may have originally referred to the land shared by multiple stakeholders. *Iriai-chi* management system in rural Japan is considered to have been established under feudalism of the Edo Period (1603-1867), when each village as a group had a collective responsibility for paying rice as land tax to each regional government or feudal domain (*han*).

The right to use *iriai-chi* (*iriai-ken* or *iriai* right) was a collective right that is hold by all the villagers as a whole, rather by each individual. It was a hereditary right given to each family (*ie*). As far as one's family was a full-fledged member of a village, he/ she was entitled to collect fuel woods, edible plants, timber, grasses and leaves for fertilizer or fodder. On the other hand, outsiders or branch families may have not been given the full right until they got the full membership of the community. *Iriai* rights were regulated by an unwritten customary code of each village. Strict management rules were established to secure resources in an egalitarian and sustainable way. The rules may have specified dates and time, places, and amounts to collect specific resources allowed to be extracted. Even use of tools was strictly regulated to prevent overexploitation. The regulations also provided for sanctions against those who violated the rules.

Management system of *iriai-chi* was closely linked to villagers' notion of land ownership. Japanese villagers tend to think that all the land in the village domain is ultimately owned collectively by all the full village members as a whole. This notion has been called *soyu* (or collective ownership of the entire village) in Japanese jurisprudence and rural sociology. As all the land in a village is potentially owned by all the village members, someone should take the permission from the village, even when one wants to sell (or convert) his/ her private land. In other words, the right to control or dispose of a piece of land ultimately belongs to the village community, and each individual cannot always have a strong legal claim to the property. In the western Japan, villagers had the rights to collect undergrowth and fallen leaves for fertilizer even in privately-owned mountains and forests (Chiba 1991:108).

As has already been mentioned, Hiroyuki Torigoe argues that "the right to life of the

underprivileged” in Japanese village commons was based on this *soyu* land tenure regime. From the viewpoint of moral economy, however, villagers’ “subsistence ethic (Scott)” should also be examined from their everyday practice of mutual help. The following example may suggest a close link between the use of commons and daily cooperation among neighbors. In a village in today’s Hiroshima prefecture, all the villagers used to collect wild grasses for green fertilizer in paddy field at the same time in the same *iriai-chi*. If a villager (or one of his/ her family members) was sick and unable to attend this group work, other villagers may have gathered grasses for the patient’s family to the amount necessary not only for that year but also for the preparation of rice nurseries of the following year (Arioka 2004: 181).

Reciprocal relations among villagers also appeared as a kind of patron-client relationship. Kizaemon Aruga, one of the pioneering rural sociologists in Japan, argues that the relationships between landowners and tenants from the late 19th to early 20th century were characterized by a reciprocal alliance expressed in the term *oya-ko* (a fictitious parent-child relationship). A landowner often provided his tenants with not only farmlands and necessary materials (seeds, fertilizers, etc), but also a residence and a mountain (or the right to use village forest) to get fuel woods and green fertilizer. The tenant, on his part, rewarded his patron by providing labor for specified number of days (Aruga 1966: 424, 492, 584-8).

The following cases may indicate that it was a widespread practice that the poor was given the highest priority in allocation of village resources. Chiba (1991: 116-7, 158) argues that, in some parts in the western Japan from early modern to modern era, the poorer section of a community was permitted to sell the products from *iriai-chi*, especially fuel woods and charcoal, which were normally allowed to use only for domestic consumption. In remote mountainous areas where paddy cultivation was not feasible, slash and burn agriculture was practiced until the 1950s. In a village in the present Kumamoto prefecture in the southern Japan, landless farmers were allowed to make a swidden even in the private woodlands owned by other villagers (Yanagida ed.1975: 136).

The poor were sometimes given priority in getting a chance for a new economic opportunity. Today, Tsugaru region of the present Aomori prefecture is one of the leading apple-growing areas. Most of the apple farms in Hirofune village in the southern Tsugaru are located in the former *iriai-chi* or village common forest. In the early 20th century, the common land was divided to the *iriai* right holders originally as the usufruct of twenty years. A sentence from the agreement on land allocation (1907) reads; “If more than one household wish to use the same parcel of land, the priority is given in the following order; (1) the poor, (2) below-average households, (3) middle class households, (4) upper-class households (*omodachi*)” (Takei et.al. eds. 1989: 196-200).

3. Restoring the Poverty-Stricken Families

One interesting aspect of the right to subsistence found in Japanese villages is that a village community sometimes made a special arrangement to get the poor and the destitute back on their feet. Village common lands including *iriai-chi* were particularly important as the place to afford them the chance to lift themselves out of poverty.

Yama-agari (“ascending a hill”) was one such arrangement, which was widely practiced in villages with a large *iriai* forest (Miyamoto 1968: 74). The following example from today’s Okayama prefecture will illustrate the general character of *yama-agari*. A poverty stricken family suffering from a barren land may have been allowed to enter and live in *iriai-chi*. They made money by selling brushwood collected in the forest, where they could also find and cultivate a more fertile and productive land. Interestingly, such a forestland was called *hinja-hagukumi-yama* (literally “a mountain that nurtures the poor”). Though some families returned to the home village after retrieving their fortunes, they were not treated as full-fledged members of the village community again, because they were heavily indebted to the community for their recovery (The Department of Justice, “National Survey of Civil Customs”, pp.461-2).

Similar custom was also practiced in small islands. In some islands in the western Japan, bankrupt families used to move to a subordinate island to start life anew in an isolated situation. They were not levied any taxes nor imposed any corvee until they restored their fortunes. Such subordinate islands were called *konkyu-jima* (“island of the destitute”) (Miyamoto 1984: 22-3). Such a special arrangement to restore the destitute can also be observed in the following case of fishing rights in a river. Chinai village along the coast of Lake Biwa was badly damaged by a serious flood in 1885. Given the scale of the disaster, the village decided not only to distribute emergency rice stocks to the victims, but also to permit them to collect necessary materials in *iriai* forest during the off-limits period. At the same time, the right to fish in the Chinai river was given exclusively to the poor victims. Even after the disaster, poor families (especially landless ones) continued to enjoy the priority right to fish in the river (Furukawa 2004: 102-113).

Ownership of common land may have been given to individual village members (*yamawari*), sometimes for the sake of helping the poor. *Yamawari* (literally “mountain dividing”) denotes the practice of parceling out woodland among the households within a village. The landholder was given the right to use the land exclusively without any restriction (though under certain conditions), and he may have been given proprietary rights later (Harada 1969; Totman 1989: 158). Though the purpose of *yamawari* would be different depending on circumstances, this practice seems often to have occurred when the mountain was denuded and threatened by flood and erosion, and communal arrangement failed to protect it (Totman, *op. cit.*). Meanwhile, Harada (1969: 127, 160, 295) cites interesting cases in the present Shiga and Nagano prefectures from the Edo to early Meiji periods when the

discrepancy between the rich and the poor was growing in rural areas. These cases reveal that *yamawari* was sometimes practiced to prevent the collapse of the poorer households in a village by giving them ownership of divided uplands as their basic property to live on.

In modern villages, debt was one of the biggest problems of commoners. In the late Meiji period, when many villagers were beset by a financial difficulty, *Hotoku-sha*¹ (or *Nomin Kyodo Kyugo-sha*, “A Society to Help Peasants”) societies were established in various areas in Japan especially to solve the poor villagers’ debt problem. According to Ikeda (1987), *Hotoku-sha* societies established in villages in the present Shiso county in Hyogo prefecture depended on the village common forests as their financial base. A part of *iriai* forest was incorporated into the asset of the societies, and the profit from the sales of lumber was loaned to the members at low interest. Many villagers borrowed money to pay off a loan and get back one’s farmland which had been held in mortgage. These societies still exist today in some villages.

4. Supporting Victims in Times of Emergency and Crisis

Village commons were also used when the villagers were affected by unexpected disasters. Wooden houses in Japanese rural villages were particularly vulnerable to a fire. In Kami-ina district of the present Nagano prefecture, families which lost their homes in a fire would be given some pieces of timber from the common forest as a token of sympathy. A village provided 12 pieces to each victim household in an extensive fire in 1858, 11 pieces each in 1859, 8 pieces each in 1865, and 6 pieces each after 1868. Some villages had *tomeyama* (forest reserve) where lumbering was prohibited by way of precaution against an unforeseen fire or other contingencies. At the same time, it is important to note that the victims also received both material and moral support from neighbors and relatives over a long period, which began with cleaning up of the debris and ended with reconstruction of the house (Takeuchi 1990: 357-70). No doubt such an emergency aid extended by villagers was a close reflection of everyday social relationships among them.

In times of a widespread natural disaster, all the members of a village or all the people in the same region would be seriously affected. Edo period is marked by three major famines, in which one can observe the ways people reacted in face of an acute food shortage. The first one, Kyoho famine, occurred in 1732 when a major invasion of plant hoppers destroyed crops in the western Japan. While the insect pests were the proximate cause of a food shortage in the first stage, it was followed by critical cold-weather damages. Around one million people were considered to have suffered from the famine. The second one, Tenmei famine in the 1780s, was triggered by a volcanic eruption of Mount Asama and ensuing cold weather. It is

¹ *Hotoku-sha* is an organization based on the moral and economic teachings of Sontoku Ninomiya, who advocated village management based on frugality and mutual assistance in the late Edo period.

estimated that around 130,000 people had died of malnutrition and associated diseases especially in the Kanto and Tohoku regions. The third Tenpo famine (1833-37) was also caused by a cold weather especially in the Tohoku region.

Widespread famines in early modern Japan especially struck the Tohoku region or the northeastern Japan. A variety of wild plants were used as famine foods in cases of acute food shortages there; those include roots of edible bracken (*warabi*), roots of kudzu vine, *onidokoro* (*Dioscorea tokoro*), acorns or nuts of oak trees, Japanese butterburs (*Petasites japonicus*), pokeweeds (*Phytolacca esculenta*), and wild lily bulbs. In times of famine, no doubt that village common lands were used to collect these wild edible plants, as with the case of modern Kotsunagi village, as we shall see later. Furthermore, many villagers violated a ban to collect such famine foods (and fuel woods) in *tomeyama* (forest reserve) including mountains or forests owned by local government (a *han* or feudal domain). In many cases, rulers gave tacit approval for these illegal activities (Kikuchi 1997). Some feudal lords intentionally opened the off-limits mountains for the needy villagers. In the famine of 1783 (Tenmei) and 1833 (Tenpo), Morioka han in the Tohoku region allowed access to its pine forests and other woodlands for villagers who wished to collect firewood. Such a mountain or forest was called *osukui-yama*, or the mountain to help people. After the famines ended, former strict rule was re-introduced to close the forests again (*ibid.*: 220-1).

Villagers' social networks based on everyday interaction should have been an important option of securing food in times of famine or a food shortage, though I could find no specific information on the matter so far. At the same time, famines seem to have strengthened the existing patron-client ties among villagers. Aruga (1966:491-5) suggests that, in the famine-prone Tohoku region, the patrons tended to extend protection to the clients in times of famine or crop failure.

During the Second World War, Japanese villages accepted a great number of town dwellers who escaped from the US air raids in major industrial cities. Immediately after the war, a number of returnees from former territories of the Japanese Empire settled in rural areas and cleared woodlands for cultivation to start a new life. According to Ikeda (1987: 64), *iriai-chi* was used as the land for cultivation for these outsiders in and immediately after the wartime. This eventually saved many villages from starvation caused by the sudden influx of outsiders.

5. Disintegration of Village Commons

Community-based forest management system in the Edo period began to be undermined by a series of land reform implemented by the modern Japanese Government established after the Meiji Revolution which put an end to feudal system in 1867. Communal ownership of commons or *iriai-chi* was incompatible with modern civil law system, which gives a definite property right (either private or public) to every parcel of land, making it salable and taxable.

After the Land Tax Reform in 1873, the Meiji government intended to nationalize village common lands. Most of the forests and mountains hitherto controlled by villagers were forced to be confiscated and nationalized, except when the villagers could prove their *iriai* rights by some documentary evidence. After the introduction of a new local administration system in 1889, Policy to Unify Village-owned Forests (1910-1939) was launched. As a result, many *iriai-chi* were incorporated into the municipalities' property to establish the financial base for the new administrative units. At the same time, some parts of *iriai-chi* were registered as a privately-owned land for a variety of reasons, allowing further accumulation of land by the propertied class.

The process of nationalization and privatization of commons was often accompanied by stiff resistance by villagers and bloodshed. A considerable number of villages took legal action to prove their *iriai* rights in order to secure their livelihood. The case of Kotsunagi village in Iwate prefecture is worthy of note. Villagers in Kotsunagi had used nearby forest in Kotsunagi mountain to collect firewood, grasses for green fertilizer and fodder, building materials, edible wild plants such as chestnut and other fruits including Japanese mulberries. In times of famine, roots of bracken (*warabi*) were dug up and eaten (Shinozaki 1966: 7-9). In 1907, this village common forest came to be owned by an outsider who had purchased the land from a moneylender in a town. The moneylender originally obtained the land from a ruined village notable who was a nominal title holder of the Kotsunagi mountain. A devastating fire in 1915 led to the open confrontation between the landowner and villagers, who tried to cut woods to put up temporary shelters. The owner flatly denied villagers' right of access to the mountain, and a part of villagers ventured to bring the matter to trial, claiming their historical rights to use the forest. Oral histories of villagers give us a vivid description of their plight and moral outrage triggered by the sudden denial of access to the common land, which especially affected the socially disadvantaged including widows (*ibid.*: 55-60).

Similar cases were also observed in Southeast Asia in the early 20th century. Burmese peasants in colonial era experienced the gradual loss of local commons (village-held forests, wasteland, rivers, and pasturage) where they formerly collected grasses and firewood, and caught fishes without almost any restrictions. "As the public wastelands became converted to cultivation, as fisheries were declared the property of Government.....the small proprietors like the tenants, were increasingly obliged to find money for needs which they could formerly supply themselves" (Scott 1975: 63). In Central Vietnam, former communal lands were taken by corrupt mandarins and village notables. The forest "traditionally served as an informal source of economic relief for the poorest villagers" came to be controlled by corrupt officials who imposed strict regulations, taxes and fines, which "threatened an important option for the most destitute" (*ibid.*: 132, 135-6). All these led to the moral outrage which eventually triggered peasant rebellions in both lower Burma and central Vietnam.

On the disintegration of former communal insurance system or *kyodo-bohin* (“common defense against poverty”), a pioneering Japanese ethnologist Kunio Yanagida commented in the 1920s as follows;

“Formerly, the only place of refuge for villagers was mountains and forests, in which the destitute would win a meager subsistence. This generous exercise of the *iriai* rights contributed greatly to supporting rural lives in olden days, as all the villagers sought wild edible resources there in a sterile year. Though such village commons provided a place to work for the destitute, the government mercilessly confiscated and divided the common lands.....(as a result) villagers came to live on charity and assistance from outside” (Yanagida 1991: 493).

Thus Yanagida lamented that villagers had lost their basis for subsistence as well as their independence. The loss of common lands substantially diminished the village poor’s chances to support themselves, making them rely on assistance and protection from the state. In the long run, the rural poor provided the labour required in the new industries developing in the cities.

In the post-war era, “*Iriai* Forestland Modernization Law” was enacted in 1966 and it further hastened the disintegration of *iriai* forests. During the post-war modernization process, there was virtually no resistance from villagers mainly because forests and mountains were no longer the important place for subsistence. In line with modern property regime under the current civil code, some of village commons came to be divided and owned privately by individuals, and others came to be owned by a Forest Producers Cooperative.

6. Conclusion

This paper gives a rough and fragmentary sketch of the right to subsistence and communal resource management system in Japanese rural areas. *Iriai-chi* or village common lands in Japan provided the destitute an opportunity to survive in a variety of ways. First, *iriai-chi*, along with other privately or publicly-owned forests, was a place to make a regular living for the poor who held a prior right on natural resources. Secondly, village commons were used as the place where bankrupt families were to restore their fortunes. Thirdly, at times of emergency such as a widespread famine and a fire, village or publicly-owned forests were used as the place to secure urgently needed materials including timber and foods. Thus the right to subsistence was often guaranteed by utilizing village commons, although it was enjoyed by the disadvantaged villagers in many different ways according to ever-changing circumstances.

As Torigoe has already suggested, the right to subsistence may not be simply a matter of

compassion or benevolence; rather, it may be a reflection of the everyday social structure of a village, especially reciprocal relations among neighbors and relatives or between patrons and clients. Villagers may have been egalitarian in their value system, but in reality they were not equal in socioeconomic status, especially after the penetration of market economy in early modern period. The unfortunate families who lost their fortunes for a disaster (natural or man-made) or other personal reasons, therefore, had to be helped by the village to correct the imbalance in basic asset of each household. At the same time, a political structure developed under feudalism, in which the village as a group was responsible for paying taxes and other social issues, may also have influenced villagers' decision to help the underprivileged, instead of excluding them as a social outcast.

Such a function of village commons in safeguarding subsistence, however, dissolved after the modern Japanese government had decided to take these communal properties for its own use as well as for private use. In today's context of globalization, however, we have to pay attention again to such a social insurance system based on the principles of moral economy and commons, in order to cope with the on-going new enclosure of commons which will eventually lead to a social exclusion of resource-weak people worldwide.

References

- Arioka, T. 2004. *Satoyama I*. Tokyo: Hosei University Press (in Japanese).
- Aruga, K. 1966. *Selected Works of Aruga Kizaemon*, II. Tokyo: Miraisha Publisher (in Japanese).
- Chiba, T. 1991. *A Study on Bald Mountains*. Tokyo: Soci  t   (in Japanese).
- Furukawa, A. 2004. *Life and Environment Histories in Rural Areas*. Kyoto: Sekaishissha Publisher (in Japanese).
- Harada, T. 1969. *Studies in the Decay of the Early Modern Common-Land System: Development and Degeneration of the Mountain Division System*. Tokyo: Hanawa Shoten (in Japanese).
- Ikeda, K. 1987. "Iriai as a Moral Economy and its Contemporary Significance: A Case of a Timber Producer's Cooperative in Hyogo Prefecture," *The Journal of Humanities* 16: 25-72 (in Japanese).
- Kikuchi, I. 1997. *Famines in Early Modern Japan*. Yoshikawakobunkan Publisher (in Japanese).
- Miyamoto, T. 1968. *Life in Homeland / Japanese Villages (Selected Works of Tsuneichi Miyamoto 7)*. Miraisha Publisher (in Japanese).
- Miyamoto, T. 1984. *Culture and History of Chugoku Region (Selected Works of Tsuneichi Miyamoto 29)*. Miraisha Publisher (in Japanese).
- Scott, J. C. 1976. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*. New Haven and London: Yale

- University Press.
- Shinozaki, G. 1966. *Peasants Involved in Kotsunagi Case*. Tokyo: Keiso Publisher (in Japanese).
- Takei, M. et al. eds. 1989. *Iriai Rights in Forests*. Tokyo: Hitotsubu-sha (in Japanese).
- Takeuchi, T. 1990. *Selected Works of Takeuchi Toshimi, I*. Tokyo: Meicho Shuppan (in Japanese).
- Torigoe, H. 1997. "On Those Who Enjoy the Use of Commons," *Journal of Environmental Sociology* 3: 5-14 (in Japanese).
- Totman, C. 1989. *The Green Archipelago: Forestry in Preindustrial Japan*. University of California Press.
- Yanagida, K. ed. 1975 [1937]. *A Study on the Livelihood in Mountainous Villages*. Tokyo: Kokusho-kankokai (in Japanese).
- Yanagida, K. 1991 [1929]. "Towns and Villages" in *The Complete Works of Kunio Yanagida*. Tokyo: Chikuma-shobo (in Japanese).