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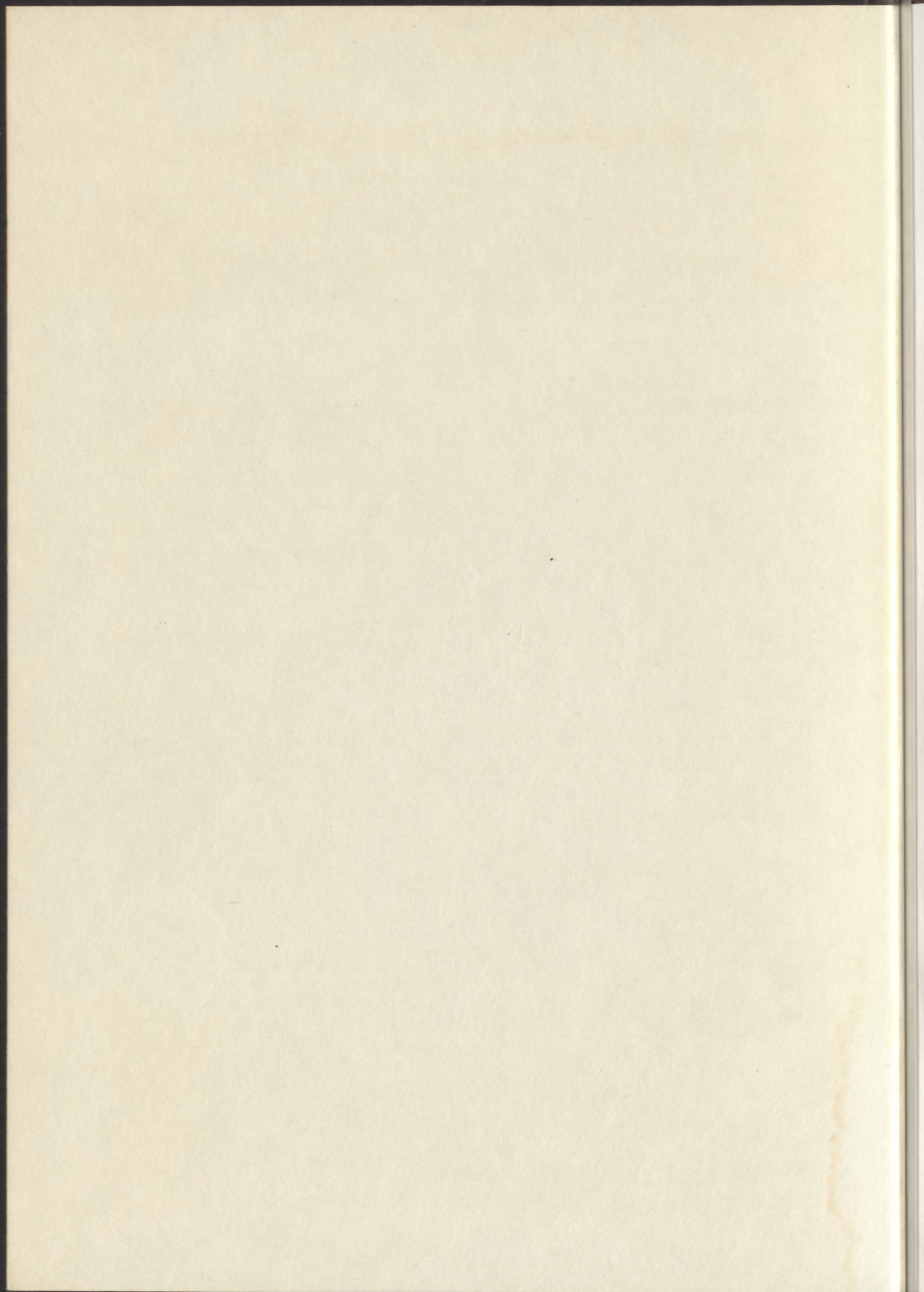
ENDRE TANKA

DEVELOPMENT OF LAND RELATIONS IN JAPANESE  
AGRICULTURE PRIOR TO THE SECOND WORLD WAR

1990

INSTITUTE FOR WORLD ECONOMICS  
OF THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

BUDAPEST



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## I. The Pre-Meiji Period

### 1. Land Relations of the Asiatic Mode of Production up to the Meiji Restoration

This study is an attempt to present the history and course of development of the fundamental production relations of Japanese agriculture and the institutional system of land ownership and land use, land protection and land tenure policy and aspects of these questions related to the modernization of the agrarian economy. Thus, the purpose of such research cannot ignore the basic fact that the emergence and change of any socio-economic formation depends on geographical-climatic-flora-population factors, production forces and relations, the special historical circumstances, social, economic and political influences, on the process of movement of this many-factored whole, on the interaction of the different elements involved and is also subordinated to their other lasting system links. Consequently, an analysis of the appropriation of land - as a natural resources and as an element of materialized labour - must also take into consideration the more important socio-economic and technical-economic relations that fundamentally determine the appropriation mechanism of land relations over the historical perspective. In the case of Japanese agriculture, this demand makes it necessary to assess a few geographical, ecological and historical endowments, without which the present agrarian structure cannot be fully understood.

Japan lies in the temperate zone, but due to its great length from north to south there are also considerable differences in climatic zones. The Ryukyu Islands belong to the tropical zone, Kyushu, Shikoku and the southern part of Honshu to the subtropics, northern Honshu to the moist, hot summer continental zone and Hokkaido to the cold summer continental zone. The climate is determined by the East Asian monsoon. Along the eastern coast the Kuro Shiwo warm stream moderates the cold, while the Oja Shiwo (Kuril) cold stream along the western coast influences the climate in the opposite direction. The winter monsoon roaring across the Sea of Japan also brings precipitation here. The periodically alternating monsoon brings warm, moist air from the Pacific Ocean in mid-June. This precipitates in the form of rain lasting for four weeks, often accompanied by typhoons and torrential rain. The winter is generally mild and there is little snow, with the exception of Hokkaido and the higher mountains. Annual precipitation is abundant, ranging from 1,000 to 3,000 mm with the figures rising from north to south. The average

annual hours of sunshine are also high: 1,972 for Japan and 2,019 in Tokyo. The temperature corresponds to the monsoon zone, with zonal deviations due to the length of the chain of islands. Together with this, the four seasons are clearly distinct.

Due to the mild climate, the abundant rainfall and the long hours of sunshine, the Japanese islands are covered with dense vegetation. In the north, to approximately the 38th parallel there are deciduous forests typical of the temperate climate zone, south of this there are evergreen forests of a subtropical type, while on the higher mountains pine forests grow above 1,500 metres.

The origins and beginning of rice cultivation in Japan are lost in the mists of time. It is still debated whether its introduction was one of the results of the adaptation of Chinese civilization transmitted by Korea, or whether the decisive factor in its spread was the "natural" cultivation form of the Southeast Asian monsoon that developed independently. The cultivation of rice in flooded fields requires a growing period of 3-4 months with a minimum average temperature of 20 °C, while the summer monsoon ensures at least 1,778 mm of rainfall. These environmental conditions are found in most parts of Japan.<sup>1</sup> It is a fact that the planting of rice under water has been flourishing in Japan since the 3rd to 1st centuries B.C.

The native character of rice growing, the gradual spread of the area under rice cultivation and the establishment of rice as a staple food fundamentally determine the land use characteristics of Japanese agriculture. The most important features in this respect are the following:

(a) The continuous cultivation of the same crop on the same area leads to the lasting deterioration of the soil, because of the continual depletion of the same nutritional elements in the soil. In order to avoid this drawback and to restore the balance of the ecosystem that is disrupted by land cultivation and can only be maintained artificially, the European model of farming developed the mixed crop rotation system based on the symbiosis of plant cultivation and animal husbandry. The combination of crop rotation with animal husbandry, as a historically developed agricultural technique, fundamentally shaped the European nutritional pattern, that is, the simultaneous consumption of plant foods, meat and dairy products.

The monsoon-dominated climate, particularly the several months of steady summer heat and the rains that are 2-4

times higher than the level of rainfall in Europe, make crop rotation unnecessary in rice cultivation without the cultivation of rice on the same land causing a deterioration in soil fertility, that is, a decline in the crop yields attainable. The Japanese model - rice growing in the monsoon zone - is based on cultivation by flooding. This is a miniature replica of the archaic natural cultivation that developed in the Mesopotamian river valleys (Tigris, Euphrates) and in Egypt (Nile): the water that floods the rice fields, either by a natural flow of water of irrigation, brings fertile mud and other nutritive elements for the soil, thus renewing its fertility each year. The regulation of the water supply by human intervention (irrigation, channeling) also has other advantages for the farmer: it creates an automatic process for the removal of the plants' by-products and various forms of pollution and cleans the soil, while the water that covers the rice fields protects the young plants from the vagaries of the weather, limits soil erosion and, by maintaining a steady water level, reduces the vertical movement of water to a minimum, thus preventing the leaching of nutritive elements from the soil. The slow flow of the water favours the growth of green algae, accelerating the concentration of nitrogen in the soil.

(b) The spread of the cultivation of rice by flooding requires an advanced system of water management (irrigation and channeling). A limitation of the introduction of rice growing is the relative scarcity of land, that is elastic only to a certain extent with technical development. While in Europe, the principle rule in bringing land under cultivation was determined by the natural productive value of the soils, in Japan, the order of land cultivation was historically the contrary. The simplest way to gain land from nature for the cultivation of rice was along the smaller water courses which, however, were not on the plains, but in the hills. Consequently for close to a millennium and half, rice was cultivated (with constant surplus labour power at the low technical level of land cultivation and water management) along the mountain streams and rivers. Until the qualitative leap in channeling and river regulation control, that is, up to the 16th century, this process continued despite the fact that it could only be applied on hilly land where the soil was of lower fertility and poor in humus. The subsequent technological revolution decisively changed not only the place where rice was cultivated but also the value of the land cultivated: from the 16th century the cultivation of rice by flooding shifted down from

the hills to the fertile flat lands.

(c) Because of the short growing period, 3-4 crops a year can be harvested where rice is cultivated by flooding in the monsoon zone, that is, it is possible to maintain the intensity of productivity without increasing the area under cultivation and without supplementary investment. In addition, rice has a higher protein content than other grains and if it is protected from the damp it can be stored for years without loss of value, properties that make it especially suitable as a staple food. The relative shortage of land is counterbalanced by intensive cultivation: there is no fallow land in the cultivation of rice and none of the land has to be rested periodically (as is the case with the European system of 2-3-crop rotation) and the entire area used for production can be cultivated continuously. All this makes it understandable why, among the different forms of cultivation, the Japanese cultivation of rice by flooding came to occupy a monopoly position within a historically relatively short period.

The above is reflected, among other things, in the fact that from earliest times right up to 1955 (when the metric system was introduced), rice determined the Japanese measures of weight and area. The measure of weight directly reflected the storability of rice: 1 koku represented 150 kg rice, that is, the quantity of rice that experience showed was essential for the survival of a man for one year calculated at a daily minimum of 1,400 calories. The landowners with varying degrees of power, the daimios and the reinos, expressed the size of their estates from earliest times on the basis of koku. The area of land that produced 1 koku (150 kg) of rice was called a tan. Since the shift of rice growing from terraced cultivation to the fertile plains substantially increased the natural fertility of the rice fields, the size of 1 tan of land steadily shrank compared to the ancient measure. In the 7th century, Japan copied the despotic, centralized power of the T'ang dynasty in China. The Taikwa reform introduced by imperial edict in 646 AD defined 1 tan as 1,200 square metre (0.12 ha). The growing fertility of the rice paddies was expressed in the famous land census (1582-1598) carried out at the order of General Toyotomi Hideyoshi (following the bloody civil war that lasted over 100 years), which defined 1 tan of land as 1,000 square metre (0.1 hectares). This measure was in force up to the beginning of the 20th century. By 1920 Japan had raised rice yields to 3 t/ha which meant that 1 tan of land shrank to 500 square metres (0.05 ha).

(d) The monopoly situation of rice-growing in agriculture can be measured most directly through the relationship of rice fields to other branches of cultivation. The climatic and soil factors in Japan are favourable for the cultivation of numerous crops besides rice (wheat, barley, potatoes, sugar-beet, leguminous plants). However, because of the historic and geographic endowments for rice cultivation by flooding, scope for other branches of cultivation was only opened where the land was unsuitable for growing rice. Thus, for example, wheat and barley can be grown in winter too in some areas in the south of Japan and in a few historical periods plant cultivation took advantage of this possibility. Similarly, the advanced cultivation of vegetables also reaches back to earliest times (although the tomato, lettuce and cabbage were only introduced to Japan around 100 years ago from Europe), forming the basis of the Japanese vegetarian diet. However, at all times the supply of fruit and vegetables represented only a modest supplement to rice-growing and was only able to provide farmers with an auxiliary income. This basic fact is the decisive historic root of the advantages and disadvantages of the rice monoculture.

One positive feature of the rice monopoly - even apart from its effect in increasing the population - was that it did not compete (and still does not compete) with the forest lands. The fundamental condition for cultivation by flooding is an abundant source of water that is easily accessible and can be regulated, something not likely to be found in forests. In the absence of this, during the "blind" centuries which did not yet know the requirements of equilibrium of the ecosystem and when vast forests were pitilessly destroyed throughout the world obeying the imperatives of land cultivation, the question of acquiring new rice fields by clearing forests did not even arise in Japan. This eliminated the danger, from the angle of the main crop, that agriculture would sweep the ecosphere - which is particularly vulnerable in the monsoon zone - into a crisis, that is, that it would destroy irreplaceable values of the ecopotential.

(e) The complex chain of causes and effects that led to the backwardness of animal husbandry in Japan had a less favourable influence on the historical monopoly of rice. In this respect, the absence of grazing as a branch of farming was decisive. On the one hand the clearing of forests would have provided the possibility for making up for this absence, but by the time the conditions for this matured from the side of the production forces, it was clearly excluded by the social

relations (the ban on the eating of meat which had been imposed by Buddhism for close to two millennia). On the other hand, the cultivation of rice by flooding played a decisive role in this question because it successfully maintained the fertility of the soil even without crop rotation or alternation of branches of cultivation, and the need to supplement rice growing with grazing and with animal husbandry providing organic fertilizer did not even arise. Besides, since earliest times, the Japanese had obtained animal protein by fishing. Consequently, even under the conditions of subsistence farming, the rational use of land would have been seriously jeopardized if they had reduced the land under cultivation - that represented only one-fifth of the space available to them - by transforming vegetable calories into animal calories - at great cost in energy value and protein, that is, if they had carried out animal husbandry based on grazing.

Thus, knowing the indirect influences of rice-growing, it is not by chance that the most ancient written record about Japan, the "Gishi-Wajin-Den" recorded as the impression of a journey by Xijin of China during the Chien-shou dynasty around 300 AD, reports that there are no horses, cattle or sheep in the country. Archaeological proofs in today's literature unequivocally refute this claim because these animals were domesticated in Japan well before the time of this ancient record. Ogura supposes that the Chinese traveller did not see them because their numbers were insignificant and also because, as in later periods too, these animals were rarely allowed to graze in the open. Since the monsoon climate is in fact unfavourable for sheep, the author regards this record as authentic as far as sheep-breeding is concerned.<sup>2</sup> Examining the historic conditions of animal husbandry in Japan, it is obvious that horses and cattle were never kept for the purposes of meat consumption but rather as draught animals and as an aid in transport. In view of this, Buddhism's strict ban on meat that was in force up to the Meiji restoration (which applied to all four-legged animals and in these case of birds made an exceptions only for poultry<sup>3</sup>) merely used the force of the religious norm to sanctify the real relations of appropriation when it banished fourlegged animals from the scope of food production and meat consumption. Considering the work involved in rice production that involved a superhuman effort in a humid climate in mud and boggy soil, in which the draught power of oxen and cattle provided a certain amount of help, it can be assumed that even without religious and moral imperatives the Japanese farmer clung to his few draught animals, in his vital interest as a producer.

(f) The archaic and mediaeval technology of rice-growing did not bring such a spectacular change in increasing the intensity of land utilisation, as the effect of the spread of the hame that originated in China in 11th century Europe on agriculture.<sup>4</sup> However the farming model of land use for rice growing by flooding<sup>5</sup> pointing far beyond the given historical period with its rational organization of small-scale production, was developed and then consolidated in the Middle Ages. The essence of the method is that the estate cultivated independently of the extent of the property, that is, including the larger, single expanses of land was divided into numerous small work plots, although not of equal size. In the example quoted in his case study, Isobe describes an estate of 0,94 hectares that was divided into 80 work plots.<sup>6</sup> Since the ridges dividing the plots occupied 0.085 hectares of the land, each small plot was an average of 0,01 ha. The size and location of the plot became more or less permanent on all cultivated land, irrespective of the size of the farmed estate. The work areas formed in this way have the following advantages:

(i) they made it possible to develop a better irrigation practice;

(ii) they facilitated hand harrowing and made it more efficient;

(iii) when the technology of raising rice seedlings was not yet widespread, this method reduced to a minimum any loss caused by irregular germination;

(iv) it made it possible to dry the harvested crop on the ridges dividing the small work plots;

(v) the grass growing on the ridges served as an important source of fodder and green fertilizer.

Isobe assumes that the ingenuity in land cultivation designed to increase soil fertility with the method of hand ploughing derived from the poor peasants (*genin, nago*) who cultivated their miniature holdings. In order to earn a livelihood, this peasant stratum was obliged to sell its labour as permanent agricultural workers to the middle peasantry (*honbyakusho*) who, as holders of larger land areas, used draught horses, extensive methods and permanent workers. The author also regards it as possible that the above NOHO method of increasing labour intensity strengthened the economic foundations of the poor peasants using it to such an extent that by the middle of the 18th century they gradually climbed up to the ranks of the middle peasantry. Perhaps even more important than the chances of social mobility is the fact that the extreme fragmentation in land utilisation in Japanese agriculture, the

estate structure that showed wide deviations even within the tiny areas cultivated can be clearly shown to have appeared in the society by the Middle Ages, as a technical and economic consequence of the cultivation of rice by flooding. The decisive role of the latter element in the relationship between the size of the area cultivated and the production monoculture must be stressed here, for it did not necessarily follow from the "natural" scarcity of arable land in Japan that plant cultivation would be perpetuated on the basis of the smallest possible unit of ownership. Although for a long period historically the size of the area cultivated and its fragmentation was the vehicle of a positive tendency, serving more efficient production and more rational farming, the rigidification of land use in traditions reaching back thousands of years became an obstacle to development when the scientific and technical revolution taking place in agriculture in the 20th century demanded the optimalization of the area cultivated.

(g) The most important function of the rice monoculture in Japan, both historically and at the present time, is to provide a lasting counterbalance in agriculture production to the relative scarcity of land. The general opinion greatly distorts this fundamental relationship: Japan is regarded, at times even in analyses claiming to be scientific, as an overpopulated country with a very limited area of arable land, as a result of which it is forced to produce rice as the best way of feeding the population. The latter view at the most can be one consideration in food policy, but it is contrary to the logic of historical and social movement. The biogenetical criteria of rice already mentioned (protein and calorie content, storability, etc.), combined with cultivation by flooding (elimination of fallow, 3-4 crops a year, maximum utilisation of soil fertility, etc.) represent a crop with an exceptionally high population supporting capacity in the Asian monsoon zone. Historically, overpopulation has been able to arise, not only in Japan but throughout South Asia, because the cultivation of rice created the conditions for this from the side of the food source.<sup>7</sup> This is the main reason why the first census conducted in Japan in 1721 already recorded 30 million inhabitants and this figure increased threefold between 1870 and 1970. It is also a fact that the predominant crops of other climatic zones (e.g., maize, wheat) did not even approach the capacity of rice to support population increase. Expressed in overgeneral terms, it could be said that to a considerable extent Japan owes its social and national existence to rice. According to the law of the double negative, the Japanese

monoculture did not switch over to its own opposite until the 20th century Japanese "consumer" society. It did so on the one hand by sweeping the country into an overproduction crisis in plant production and on the other hand, by occupying the overwhelming majority of the arable land available it stood in the way of selective specialization and to changes in the branch of cultivation to meet consumers' demands, thus greatly undermining the chances of self-sufficiency and increasing the country's dependency on food exports, exposing it to the instability of the world market. It is only within this special and complex historical role of rice production by flooding that a sound evaluation can be made of Japan's acute relative land scarcity: the fact that only 37 per cent of the country's territory serves for living and working space and the infrastructure and only 15 per cent of this is cultivated land. This geomorphological limitation did not force the country to establish a monoculture in agriculture, but the relative overpopulation is only the consequence of this: for thousands of years the bulk of the population settled on the plains most suitable for rice cultivation and later commerce and industry was also concentrated here.

## 2. Land Ownership and Land Tenure Relations

History regarded Japan's social development up to the 1960s as the classic example of a break-away from thousands of years of stagnation under feudalism through a qualitative leap. As regards the bypassing of the early development stages of capitalism (or at least their historical shortening) and the accelerated transition to imperialism, the prediction of social formation theory is correct. However, the concept that from the early Middle Ages up to the mid-19th century Japan was a feudal state and society is not tenable.

The scientific resolution of this cardinal question was largely determined by the concept taken from Volume I of Marx's Capital. Marx suggested that with its feudal land ownership structure and developed small peasant economy, Japan provides a far more faithful picture of the European Middle Ages than all the history books that are generally inspired by "bourgeois prejudices".<sup>8</sup> Today's Japanese agrarian economics also departs from Japanese feudalism as a basic historic truth. According to Kajita in Japan the age of feudalism came to an end with 1868. The feudal agricultural landowning system as a whole is similar in all countries and Japan's was not fundamentally different from that of other countries' either.<sup>9</sup> Ogura suggests

that on the basis of feudal ownership it is important to make a distinction between serfdom and slavery. In feudal Japan, the farming peasant, the reino, was not a slave but a serf.<sup>10</sup> In the archaic society of "natural" community, work and ownership were still merged in a direct whole and their separation began in the relationship of the individual and the community directed at the appropriation of land as the fundamental means of production, and reached institutional forms that statically rigidified development. This is why the essential transformation of Japanese land relations provides an answer to whether feudal development occurred in Japan or whether here too we have to do with an atypical, transitional society of the Asiatic production mode.

The land ownership relations played a decisive role in the fact that Japanese society like the Chinese model of the Asiatic production mode remained suspended in a transitional form between the archaic communal and the ancient production modes until the spread of European industrial capitalism, so that up to the mid 19th century its history is characterized by "Asiatic" stagnation and isolation.

The archaic, tribal communal ownership of land already began to disintegrate in the first centuries before our era in the wake of the struggles among the Japanese tribes that lived in patriarchal clans. With the spread of rice cultivation by flooding, arable land became the most valuable of the social goods, the source of all power, and the tribes waged war among each other for its exclusive possession and to extend the rule exercised through its appropriation. Jimmu, coming from the victorious Yamato tribal alliance who according to tradition acceded to the throne in 660 BC as the first Japanese emperor as founder of the state in theory proclaimed state ownership, embodied in his own person, of all land. Thus right from the start Japanese statehood appeared in the guise of the supreme landowner. The emperor and later the shoguns who took over his real power in the same way as the oriental dictatorial states, originally based their rule here too on the holding of public functions, a number of which continued to exist for a long while. A fundamental condition for rice cultivation is the regulation of rivers and the introduction of draining, channeling and irrigation technologies. Under the relations of subsistence farming this cannot be effective without gathering manpower and organizing public works. The despotic state in fact exercised public functions in creating and maintaining the conditions for the cultivation of rice by flooding. For example, when Ieyasu Tokugawa (the later shogun who

again united for close to three centuries the state power that had been divided between the two emperors and the bakufu, or military government) brought the Kanto plain under his rule in the 1590s it was largely a desolate region totally unsuitable for the cultivation of rice because of the flooding rivers and swamps. However, Ieyasu changed the course of the Tone river - which had earlier flowed into the Bay of Tokyo and channeled it directly into the Pacific Ocean. This major innovation brought a qualitative leap in rice production because it not only brought the cultivation of new arable land but also meant the acquisition of the most fertile land.<sup>11</sup>

The establishment of the public functions of the Japanese state and the role of the despot (shogun) as "main contractor" is very closely related to the appropriation mechanism of the Asiatic mode of production. For this position as the owner of the means of production and its action on behalf of and in the interest of the community created the perpetual right of the state to levy the surplus labour product of the state's sovereignty of ownership and in the absence of private land ownership, rent and tax coincided here.) The patriarchal taxation system evolved in a natural way from the thousands of years of traditions of the archaic communal society which made the provision of common stocks the imperative of survival. And tradition hallowed by the law of common ownership set the level of services in such a way that they were precisely sufficient for the creation of the taxation system. With the natural increase in the number of village communities it became unnecessary to increase the services which were imposed by customs and tradition consolidated to the force of law without the need for further specific justification. The fact that the extortion of land rents by the "tax press" nevertheless became inordinate and attempted to lay hold of an ever greater proportion of the part needed for simple reproduction was the consequence of the inevitable intensification of all kinds of exploitation. It is not by chance that the history of the shogunate alone recorded 150 peasant revolts and historians know of 1,240 Japanese peasant uprisings and movements from the 17th to the mid-19th century.

The bureaucratically centralized tax economy of the Tang age in China (618-906) imposing a pyramidal structure on the village communities offered the Japanese empire a model that could be readily copied. From then on the taxation system operated as a sound institution and up to the Meiji restoration guaranteed the levies in kind of at least 50 per cent of the surplus product.

The basic Marxist formula of the ownership relations of the Asiatic mode of production is that the individual is only a possessor. There exists only communal ownership and only private possession.<sup>12</sup> The communal ownership of land and its subordination to the imperial power at a symbol of statehood in the name of "national tribalism" are beyond dispute in Japanese history. However, the question of whether the "private possession" - in the manner of the European system of land grants based on the feudal tenure chain - gave the individual landholder private land ownership is evaluated in different ways. In the Tokugawa age, for example, the shogun retained one-quarter of the land in his own power, while the other three-quarters were divided among the close to 270 daimios. The latter are characterized as feudal oligarchs who owed the shogun military and other services for the feudal tenure.<sup>13</sup> The Japanese noble land ownership thus undoubtedly set out on the path of development that led from "breaking the umbilical cord" of the community and towards private ownership autonomy. That this social movement did not arise from organic change but followed a foreign model does not alter this fact: according to Tōkei, "it can be demonstrated that the basis and starting point of the Japanese noble land ownership was the mandarin-official land possession".<sup>14</sup> With the development of the division of labour and the spread of factories and the money economy, this tendency was considerably strengthened by the appearance of Japanese commercial and usurers' capital that strove to share the peasants' surplus product with the tax collectors and to integrate itself into the order of patriarchal exploitation. Usurers lent the money required to wage war not only to the samurais, but at times to the daimios too. Despite the bans and restrictions protecting noble land ownership from appropriation and burdens, these services ensured increasing land acquisition for usurers' capital through mortgaging of the land. At the end of the 18th century this circumstance fundamentally transformed the Japanese system of land use. The merchants and usurers, the "new rich" generally did not have state-political power over the village community and because of this could not force the land-cultivating peasant into personal (patriarchal) dependency. For this reason, to ensure the exploitative appropriation of part of the surplus products, land rent was introduced: the land rent was not levied in the form of compulsion outside the economy (through state tax), but in the form of rent. According to estimates, by the end of the Tokugawa age, close to one-third of the available land had come into the hands of commercial and usurers' capital.<sup>15</sup>

In order to prove the historical continuity of land use by small commodity producers, a number of authors trace the origin of Japanese land rent far back to the period preceding the appearance of commercial and usurers' capital and even before barter. As Chira suggests, although the Meiji period institutionalized the rent system, land rent existed in different forms in a great part of Japanese history.<sup>16</sup> As the earliest example of this, Chira refers to the Taika reform that liberated the slaves, that the ruling elite proclaimed primarily to weaken the uji aristocracy by the return to the emperor of their lands as well as of all arable land in the country and its redistribution among the peasant village communities (645 AD). But we also know from history that the execution of this reform served a radically different purpose: the land of the defeated ujis was given to the Shinto clergy and to the oligarchs who expanded their existing estates in this way (without extra investment) or who took over the tax burdens of the peasantry in local village communities in return for bringing their lands under their own domination.<sup>17</sup> In reality this step - whether in the form of tax or land rent-only strengthened the noble land ownership on the basis of an intervening compromise by the central power (made temporarily in the hope of consolidation). Thomas C. Smith points out that the rent system operated in many areas even before the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), but the development of rent was accelerated by the spread of commerce that at the same time intensified the disproportions of the unjust distribution of holdings.<sup>18</sup> It is also a historical fact that, in ordering his survey of all lands in the 1580s, Toyotomi Hideyoshi did not wish to ease the "land hunger" of the village communities through distribution of land, nor did he place land rent in the service of the spread of independent small peasant land use. In the final analysis, it appears unhistorical to project land rent to the pseudo-feudal Japanese Middle Ages, because this institution lacked the economic foundations of the pre-capitalist land relations: commercial and usurers' capital, the capitalist tenant as the subject of the legal relationship. The traces of land rent that can be observed in certain historical aspects point not in the direction of peasant plot ownership but of the emancipation of noble land ownership.

The emancipatory aspirations of noble land ownership in face of state ownership also drew on other sources. Thus from the 9th century the bloody conflicts among the noble families (e.g., the struggle of the Fujiwaras and the Tairas) gave rise to the "strong houses" from the anarchy of power. Although the lords of these houses promised the peasants

protection from the extortion by smaller robbers and bandits, the protection and the independence was, among others, a pretext to remove their lands from the patriarchal pressure of taxation. Besides this, the development of water management and irrigation technology also favoured the noble land ownership: it made it possible to bring new land under cultivation. Even in the 18th century this process absorbed the surplus manpower and created a situation of equilibrium between the number of households and the growing population. Although the increase in the number of village communities increased the state's tax basis, land was acquired at the expense of the lands in communal use which had previously served as an important source of manure, fodder and firewood for the village communities. The widespread reduction of the common lands - for example, through the steady restriction of the possibility of grazing - led to the decline of soil fertility because it increasingly eliminated the chances of acquiring organic manure. Its other negative effect was that it increasingly upset the equilibrium of the water cycle established earlier and gave rise to merciless struggles among the village communities (old and new) for the acquisition of irrigation water. The "feudal NOHO" technology of rice cultivation was characterized by shallow and inefficient hand ploughing and inadequate fertilizing so that there were no substantial differences in yield determined by soil quality. For this reason, the cultivation of new areas largely brought profits for those who occupied the best and largest lands (profit-dependency). These persons were high-ranking officials in the state bureaucracy, the principal beneficiaries of the Asiatic mode of production, or daimios who were traditionally able to make their land ownership independent of the state ownership.<sup>19</sup>

In European development, the peasant plot ownership is the first ownership institution towards making the individual independent of the community, the starting point of the ancient form of ownership. What is the situation regarding this later basis of the feudal production mode in the Japanese land relations? The distinct class division took place among the peasantry well before the disintegration of the village communities. Only the "hon-byakusho" or wealthy peasant was a member with full rights of the village community, while the poor peasant who could not even afford green tea was looked on with contempt as a "water-drinking peasant" ("mizunomi-byakusho"). According to some authors, the wealthy peasants were the servants and serfs of the daimios and samurais, so that the poor peasants suffered double subordination in the feudal hierarchy. Other views hold that the "hon-byakusho"

held his land in actual ownership and he should therefore be correctly qualified as a quasi peasant landowner. In this view, this land-owning stratum made up the bulk of the peasantry before the Meiji revolution.<sup>20</sup> The sociological reality of the quality of peasant existence provides a better guide than the arguments of terminological debate. In this respect, Kajita stresses the following as essential aspects, even at the end of the Tokugawa period: the peasants were tied to the land and each year they had to pay half of their produce as tax. Merely because they were born peasants they were forced to spend their entire lives labouring in the mud of the rice paddies. If a peasant was unable to tolerate his fate any longer and fled from his village, his whole family was punished and in cases even killed.<sup>21</sup> On the basis of these facts and despite Ogura's categorical view qualifying reinos as serfs there can be little doubt that the social situation of the Japanese peasant was far closer to that of the slave than to that of the serf in the German form of ownership.

The strengthening of noble land ownership linked to the feudal organization and the class division of the peasantry did not change the fact that peasant plot ownership did not and could not come into being in pre-capitalist Japan.

The irrefutable proof of this is the Japanese ownership relationship as the fundamental quality of appropriation-production relations. While in European feudalism the dependency of the peasants on their masters took the nature of private ownership, in Japan this relationship remained patriarchal until the unfolding of capitalism. Thus the land ownership relationship too was the vehicle of a direct master and servant hierarchy based on tradition - the relations of personal dependency indispensable for extorting extra work - that tradition raised into a law and thus made manifestly despotic. The main reason for the stagnation was the inadequate development of the social division of labour, its uneven evolution that left the village untouched and thus gave scope to the conserving effect of rent in kind (produce). The germs and strengthening shoot of noble land ownership did not alter the fact that the village community reproduced in unchanged form and its self-sufficiency based on the unity of industry and agriculture, continued to be the foundation of the subsistence economy. For a long while even the emergence of commercial and usurers' capital was unable to shake this stagnation of the production mode because rural industry blended in an archaic unity with agriculture and as a result commercial capitalism for centuries stagnated at the mercantile stage.

Marx already warned of the negative social aspects of the village communities that are generally portrayed as idyllic (including their tendencies to eliminate the personality, deny the role of the individual and condemn him to passivity).<sup>22</sup> The Japanese village community, the mura, is too complex sociologically to be characterized by a single scheme. However one of its most essential attributes became the de facto and legal degradation of the individual within the community's order of values. Thus the legal system regarded the individual as non-existent even in the Tokugawa period and recognized only the "family household community" (ije) as a subject of law (e.g., as a subject of taxation). The ije is a patriarchal social group whose cohesion is fundamentally ensured not by blood relations, but by the division of labour according to a strict hierarchy and based on traditions reaching back thousands of years. Just as the power of the despot standing at the peak of the pyramid hangs over everyone, so everyone within the ije (even those marrying into it) is subordinated to the head of the family. Discrimination on the basis of sex was an integral part of the dependency. Even in the mid-20th century sociology characterized the ije of the village community as a place where the lot of Japanese women was humility, diligence, self-sacrificing endurance and acceptance of their fate and where they had no say in face of their mothers-in-law, despite the fact that they had to perform the heaviest physical work.<sup>23</sup>

On the basis of common tribal ownership the family division of labour necessarily broadens to the social scale. Marx regarded the family division expanded to the social level as a caste system in the Asiatic mode of production.<sup>24</sup> The perpetuation with this content of relations of exploitation in the undeveloped class society occurred in Japanese history too. According to the strict hierarchy of orders under the Tokugawa shogunate, society was divided into four castes: the orders of si (warrior), no (cultivator), ko (craftsman) and so (merchant). The role of agriculture in supporting the nation can be clearly measured in the numerical proportions of the castes too: while 7 per cent of the population were warriors, 6 per cent craftsmen and merchants and 3 per cent other categories, 84 per cent belonged in the caste of cultivators. The perpetuated stagnation of the caste system as the economic basis of the society as a consequence of despotism extended to the historical perspective: in 1639 the house of Tokugawa closed Japan's doors to the outside world. The more than two centuries of "Asian" isolation - among others -

conserved the patriarchal order of ownership in land relations too. This meant that for the individual to appropriate the land as a means of production, he had to belong to the community. But the immediate producers on the one hand and the expropriators of the land rent on the other did not belong to the same community, as the prior condition for their possession. The land cultivating peasant was a simple member of a real village community, who however, gave his surplus labour to the "national tribalism", that is, a fictive community. The expropriator of the surplus product although a privileged member of the community (a state official holding public office or an aristocrat) does not belong to a real community. It is only real when seen from above (in essence it is rather a system of taxation), while viewed from below it is a mere abstraction which cannot hide the fundamental social contradiction: a class society had arisen on the basis of tribal communal ownership. In keeping with the two kinds of community - real and created - there are also two kinds of land possession relations: the despotic (village communal land use burdened with personal dependency and the taxation burden) and the democratic.

Summing up, in qualifying the mode of production of pre-capitalism in Japan on the basis of the inductive analysis of the development of land relations we regard as convincing the arguments of the philosophy of history and sociology proving, by the application to Japanese society of the Marxist category of the Asiatic mode of production, that pseudo-feudalism evolved in Japan.<sup>25</sup> The tribal communal ownership developed into the Asiatic mode of production of the Chinese modal and type, then "the special development of this which naturally requires a concrete historical explanation led into a third phase remotely reminiscent of the European 'German' form".<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, we interpret the special historical factors that in the process of internal ferment became catalysts of the Prussian path of capitalization, not as conditions facilitating a break out of the "Asian" stagnation, but rather only as breaking away from the umbilical cord of the community in the 19th century. The special features involved are as follows:

(a) The relative scarcity of land that arose early because of the natural endowments. As the lands that could be taken into possession diminished, this increasingly stood in the way of the reproduction of the Asiatic mode of production and the society demanded the private ownership of land for its development.

(b) The geographical and natural fragmentation of the island country despite the homogeneity of the population impeded the

subordination of the village communities and family households lastingly to the despotic central power under the same conditions.

(c) In the cultivation of rice by flooding - that is, in ensuring the staple food - the rationality of small-holding farm organization in time counterbalanced the role of the shogun (emperors) as "chief contractor" in the field of ownership and later forced it into the background. This rationality increasingly regarded successful cooperation in work at attainable through individual appropriation (that is, on the basis of peasant plot ownership as the new material incentive).

Thus, the fully-emerged Japanese pseudo-feudalism also ripened the germs of private land ownership in its land relations.

## II. The Meiji Land Reform

In 1868 the bloodless Meiji revolution that overthrew the Tokugawa shogunate and restored imperial rule, brought a new era in the history of Japan: the period of modernization of society, bourgeois transformation and capitalization. The failure of the policy of "Asian isolation" followed for centuries left the country a single alternative for averting the threat of colonial dependence: to make intense efforts to catch up to advanced Western capitalism. The vital interest of preserving national independence thus coincided with the long-term constraint for economic growth and thus, despite the class contradictions, was able to act as a catalyst for social progress. At the same time this priority at the cost of a new class compromise with an alliance of the landowners and the new emerging bourgeois elements made the transformation of the pseudo-feudal society with reforms an urgent imperative. The fact that this social movement came "from above", from the embryonic state of commercial and industrial capital and the bourgeoisie foreshadowed the lasting predominance of feudal elements in the society, the patriarchal tradition and order of values.

Emperor Mutsuhito ("Meiji", the "Illumined") deprived the Tokugawa family of all its estates, then in 1872 passed a law abolishing all privileges of the nobility, proclaiming the peasants' right of free movement and introducing private land ownership. However, the details of the land reform and the change in land relations cannot be understood without a clarification of the historical functions that faced Japanese

agriculture in the period of original capital accumulation and accelerated industrialization. Any country accepting the challenge of modernization can ensure the surplus capital required for industrialization from external sources (e.g. colonialization) or from its own economy. Since Japan could only count on the latter source, it had to squeeze the capital needed to create the strategic branches (mining, metallurgy, engineering and shipbuilding, armaments industry, etc.) from the agrarian sector. Thus, in order to achieve an upswing in the economy, the following main tasks were imposed on agriculture:

(a) it had to generate the material funds required for industrialization;

(b) it had to provide the financial sources to cover the administrative costs of modernization;

(c) it had to produce the foreign exchange needed for raw materials and the import of machines from abroad;

(d) it had to supply industry with a large volume of cheap manpower,

(e) it had to supply the labour force and the population in general with cheap food;

(f) it had to create a market to absorb the products of the developing industries.

It is quite clear that the above functions also embody conflicting rationalities so that their simultaneous and combined assertion in cases led to disfunctional influences. One factor that was extremely important in its historical consequences, as one of the criteria of the Prussian path of capitalization, was the purchase of labour far below its value: although this provided industrial capital not only with high profits but also with an army of cheap labour that could be exploited over a long period, from the outset it prevented the flexible expansion of the domestic consumer market. The impoverished peasantry and the industrial proletariat working for starvation wages could not represent a dynamically growing, liquid demand. It is therefore not by chance that a number of agrarian economists see a direct relationship although not as a "function" of agriculture between the constraint of original capital accumulation, the absence of a domestic market and the imperialist expansion and the emergence of militarism. Kajita even sees a certain cyclical pattern in that Japan, in its competition with the advanced industrial states to win markets was swept into wars approximately every ten years from the end of the 19th century (1894: China-Japan; 1904: Russian-Japan, 1914: world war; 1931: Manchuria aggression).<sup>27</sup>

Agriculture met the functions indicated mainly by intensifying the burden of taxation. From 1873 the government levied one-third of the agricultural gross product in the form of land tax. (For example, between 1888 and 1892 the agricultural land tax represented 85.6 per cent of state revenues. Although this ratio declined to 42.9 per cent by 1912, it was still 40 per cent in 1940, while at the same time workers in agriculture represented close to half of the total population.)<sup>28</sup> Despite this, the agricultural gross product increased by 121 per cent between 1878 and 1912. Between 1890 and 1914 the growth in Japan's national income can be attributed largely to the increase in the performance of agriculture. In addition, between 1894 and 1914 the population increased by 25 per cent which, according to Ogura created a broad domestic market with the economic union of the country. One of the indications of the consequences of this was that the growing food demands pushed up prices on the food market, although not at a steady pace.<sup>29</sup> However, this development trend did not change the tendency to militarization that arose from the narrowness of the market.

In this way the burdens of original capital accumulation were born primarily by agriculture, while the success of industrialization depended on the continued smooth operation of the ancient patriarchal burden of taxation. This determination in itself decided the further fate of land relations: even their capitalist development could not break through the system of institutions of semi-feudal land ownership, land use and appropriation. The ruling class of the Meiji era clearly saw, in the midst of the reforms of bourgeois transformation carried out with feverish haste, that the maintenance of the exploitative taxation system was a question of vital interest and that its ancient structure sanctified by traditions must not be disturbed but rather what was needed was a landholding policy that protected the tax collectors and landowners and guaranteed the collection of the land tax. This meant that it was precisely land relations, the principal source of bourgeois development—that received the least from the capitalization, because the equivocal nature of the social transformation was reflected primarily in the crippling of the agrarian sector and its stagnation because of the continued domination of the pseudo-feudal elements. As Kajita aptly puts it the light of modernization did not reach the agricultural labourers.<sup>30</sup>

While the "sacrifice" of agriculture on the altar of economic growth and its lasting exploitation in the interest of original capital accumulation a process that inevitably affected the

small peasant masses the most cruelly and with the most drastic consequences was a reality, in the same way ideology strove to hide this fact and, with the apology of false consciousness, to integrate the facts of exploitation to the ruling order of "healthy capitalization". The Hotokusha (literally: "the repayment of virtue") that unfolded in the 1880s still arose from the demand to provide ideological justification for the power of private land ownership. It assumed that the prosperity of agriculture and the stability of society depend decisively on the big landholders who have an interest in technological innovation and investments in the commercial infrastructure. The movement organized voluntary societies among the peasantry for the spread of modern agricultural methods and to strengthen the moral consciousness of the agricultural worker. At times the organization exercised an influence on agricultural policy, but the assertion of interests one-sidedly favoured the big landowners. Thus, for example, in 1906 they succeeded in persuading the government to impose a protective tariff on foreign rice importers. At the same time, the rise in domestic rice prices adversely affected the land tenants and industrial workers.<sup>31</sup>

With the growing dissatisfaction and unrest of the small peasant masses, the ideology that openly proclaimed and asserted in practice the supremacy of the ruling elite could not enjoy a lasting unchallenged domination. Although the Meiji state machinery continued to defend the privileges of the landowners, in the field of ideology the Hotokusha movement was quickly pushed aside by the view that idealized the small goods producing farmer, the smallholder. According to the nohonshugi concept (literally: "agriculture is the foundation"), the agrarian sector is the supporter of the nation and its most important constituent element is the jisakuno, or the smallholder farmer. This ideology which acquired an anticapitalist colouring after the tur of the century, was in fact even more reactionary in content and more retrograde than its predecessor. Its demands regarding the social order reach back to the ideal of the patriarchal, autarkic, independent village community and it rejects all state and political institutions that undermine this traditional order. In this way it unhistorically denies the justification of commodity and money relations. In addition, it creates the illusion that the small-scale producing peasant rise morally above Japanese society and on this basis (and not on the basis of his place in the production relations) he can demand a change in the

unjust order of values imposed on him. According to Yokoi Tokiyoshi - known as the popularizer of the nohonshugi ideology the viability of a country depends on the virtues of its middle class families (diligence, obedience, courage, etc.). According to him, soldiers need such qualities to defend the homeland. Therefore the agricultural workers, who are in closest contact with the land, love it and the homeland the most. It is also they who show the greatest loyalty to the ruler. For this reason, he argues, the foundation of the country is the work of conservatism which must be basically defended by the conservative people. He then concludes that the only stratum of the people that is particularly conservative consists of agricultural workers. It is not difficult to discover the trap of militarism behind this social demagoguery: it is this that gives the theory its truly reactionary core and makes it so dangerous. It is a fact that at the end of the Meiji era this ideology moved slightly beyond mere oratory when several government proposals were produced, aimed at easing the defencelessness of land tenants. However, the national assembly rejected all these initiatives. In 1897 the first credit bank and then in 1900 the Industrial Cooperative Society Law promised social advancement for the jishakuno by offering state loans and short-term credit to facilitate the acquisition of land ownership. However, in reality this did not mark the beginning either of expansion for the small plot owners or of the acquisition of land by the impoverished land tenants.<sup>32</sup>

### 1. Main Components of the Meiji Land Reform

Private land ownership - common ownership. In 1871 the government declared that the agricultural workers are entitled to cultivate any land and that they can redeem the land they cultivate. The state ensured a life annuity for the former landowners as redemption of the land. In 1872 a regulation introduced private land ownership. Simultaneously, the feudal-type ban on encumbrances and appropriation was removed, the possibilities were created for the circulation of land and the owner's theoretically unlimited right of disposal was recognized. The introduction of the land tax in 1873 made it necessary to keep a public record of private land ownership, that is, the institutionalization of the cadastral register.

In the course of the survey of lands made prior to the registration, the interests of the earlier landowners were clearly given precedence. For one thing, the private ownership

sanctified the acquisition of land encumbered with usurers' loans and those who actually cultivated such land, and the original owners were unable to claim it. And the holders of the mortgages automatically became owners under the law. These grounds alone caused a large increase in the area of land that was rented which after 1873 represented one-third of the cultivated land.<sup>33</sup> For another, the new settlement on the grounds of abolishing the feudal institutions firmly refused to recognize lasting possession backed by customary law during the centuries of the shogunate. Formerly, the landowner was unable to terminate the so-called "perpetual rent" while the land reform, in its summary procedure, made it possible to deprive the tenant of the land even if his legal forebears had possessed the same area of land for centuries without interruption.

Within a few years the new land policy eliminated common ownership that had served as the indispensable source of forest resources and grazing for thousands of years, backed by the force of customary law. This step was induced by the technical requirement of land registration since it called for a sharp distinction between state land and private land. In 1872 the law still distinguished three forms of land ownership: state, private and communal ownership. The latter extended to the common forests, grazing fields and all other land in communal use for which nobody had made a specific claim to ownership. A document specifying the quality of common land was issued for forests and grazing land used and commonly owned by the village community. (In the case of common ownership by two or three village communities, the recognition of communal ownership was made in separate documents for each of the villages.) However, between 1876 and 1881 the category of common ownership was eliminated and all of the land previously qualified in this way was declared to be in either private or state ownership. The legal technique used for the appropriation of communal lands was that in the case of disputed ownership, the government had to determine the ownership right. As a result of this process, in 1890 the total area of forests and natural grazing lands in state ownership increased to 17,588.000 hectares. According to Ogura, this area contained around 1 million hectares of grazing land that was suitable for animal husbandry.<sup>34</sup> The "devouring" of common land with the capitalization of agriculture had two negative consequences. Its direct consequence was a decline in the replacement of soil fertility or the deterioration of fertility. (It deprived the tenants and peasant owners on

a mass scale of their earlier source of organic fertilizer.) Its more distant and even more direct consequence was the decline of Japanese animal husbandry. Ogura sees the historical roots of the present shortage of grazing land in this turning point: the Meiji state passed the annexed communal lands almost free of charge in part to the samurais who revolted finding themselves without patrons and a source of livelihood and in part to the newly appointed higher government officials. Although some of these attempted farming on a large scale, they generally met with little success and their farms generally did not survive the storms of history.<sup>35</sup>

Land tax. In 1873 the government abolished the feudal tax burdens and introduced an annual land tax amounting to 3 per cent of the estimated value of the land and payable in cash. The local taxes could in cases increase the rate by a further 1 per cent. The new taxation system appeared to be modern since it selected the evaluation of the land and not the crop estimate (yield) as its basis, that is, it attempted to move beyond the indicators in kind. However, in reality the taxation in cash was the privilege of the landlords and became their main instrument of parasitical appropriation. For the land tax only became payment in cash to the benefit of the landowners. In the relations between the owner and the tenant, the state left the determination of the fee for use of the land, the land rent to the free disposal of the parties, formally bowing to the principle of contract by agreement arising from the adjunct position of the commodity relationship. The result was that with its sheer social weight, the owners' monopoly, consolidated on the basis of the relative scarcity of land imposed a land rent in kind identical in extent to the earlier exploitation (later fixed through its political power). This was one half of the annual rice harvest. It is characteristic of the smooth operation of the patriarchal tax burden that according to the findings of a survey carried out as late as 1941 a rent in kind of this extent was paid by the tenants of practically all of the rice paddies and 57 per cent of the plantations in the mountains.<sup>36</sup> Since, besides handing over half of his crop as rent, the tenant also had to cover the substantial costs of fertilizer, sowing seed, land cultivation equipment, etc., the greater part of the income received from sale of the remainder of the crop was consumed by the investment required for reproduction, enabling the tenant to spend only a small part for his own livelihood. In reality, the income earned from farming was not sufficient to cover even the reproduction of the tenant's labour. This left only two paths open to the tenant: to rise to the rank of landowner

by buying land and thus grow rich, or to abandon farming and escape from misery to industry. However, the acquisition of land by the tenant was a highly unrealistic possibility. According to a calculation by Nasu Shiroshi 1942, an agricultural labourer would have to save half of his daily wage for twelve and a half years - assuming a wage of 2,000 yen to become a tenant. (In view of the minimum cost of living, such heroic efforts were out of the question.) The tenant would have to save for 72 years to acquire the sum needed for the purchase of land.<sup>37</sup> Large numbers of tenants became bankrupt due to the high land prices and the rapid indebtedness resulting from inflation, and as a consequence they joined the army of cheap industrial manpower.

The reduction of the land tax paid to the government and the sale at growing prices of the rice rent collected from the tenants, combined with inflation, became capital accumulation catalysts for the transformation of the structure of land ownership. Under the influence of revolts against the new land tax (e.g., the Satsuma uprising in 1877) and with the opening of new tax sources (e.g., alcohol tax, sugar consumption tax, customs revenues, etc.), in 1878 the government reduced the land tax to 2.5 per cent. With the advance of industrialization, the gradual reduction of this tax in cash continued. Prices soared with the inflation which meant that the rice acquired by the landowners as rent and which continued to represent half of the crop, was sold at ever higher prices while they paid a steadily declining rate of pre-inflation tax. It was after 1871 that they were placed in a clearly one-sidedly advantageous situation under the influence of the so-called Matsukata Masayoshi deflation. The new financial equilibrium was achieved through radical price reduction which did not spare rice either: rice prices fell while the rice value ration of land taxes and land rents rose. Because of this the tenant had to give more rice as land rent and as a seller received less money for his rice on the market. The high land rents and the usurious interest rate of 15-30 per cent led to the ruin of smallholders and land tenants on a mass scale: their lands were auctioned, sold or returned to the owners. Between 1883 and 1885 alone 212,505 families lost their land because of failure to pay their taxes. 78 per cent of these families indicated poverty as the reason for their failure to pay.<sup>38</sup> This process automatically produced the redistribution of the available arable land to the benefit of the new landowners of the Meiji state. The concentration of land accelerated even before the turn of the century: between 1882 and 1892 the

proportion of new rentals rose from 34 to 40 per cent and by 1900 close to 50 per cent of the available land was cultivated by tenants.<sup>39</sup> As we shall discuss later, the concentration of land ownership certainly did not mean the expansion of farm size because it was in the economic interest of the landowners to keep the land fragmented and to create as many small rented holdings as possible.

Legal settlement. The economic power of the new-type agrarian oligarchy increased together with its political strength. The landowners held 129 of the 300 seats in the bicameral parliament first opened in 1890 on the basis of the Meiji Constitution that was drafted in 1899 following the pattern of Prussian militarism. It is thus not by chance that the Meiji Civil Law Codex that came into force in 1898 as the principal instrument for the class rule stabilization of land relations together with its legal institutions legally served the one-sided assertion of the predominant power and interests of the landowners. The land rent regulations completed the deprivation of the poor peasant tenants of all rights. The institution of so-called "perpetual rent" confirmed by customary law was entirely rejected by the Codex: rent for a fixed period could cover a maximum of 20 years, while continuous rent could be signed with a validity of no more than 15 years. These regulations provided a legal basis for depriving the tenant of his land, even if he (and his predecessors) had been cultivating the same area for centuries. The tenant exercised no rights whatsoever over the land apart from its use, so that he was not entitled to dispose of it, even within the framework of rational utilisation. (He could not hire out or sub-rent the land and could not burden it with a mortgage or in any other way.) Rent for an unspecified period which was the general custom in Japan could be revoked by the owner at any time and he could take back the land, the only stipulation being that he had to warn the tenant of this intention one year before the expiry. If the owner sold the land to a third person or transferred it to him in some other way, the new owner could remove the renter at will because the renter was not entitled to protection in any form. This meant that the valid rental, as a contract, not only lost its validity towards third persons, but did not have any binding force even between the two contracting partners: the tenant was unable to assert his rights of possession and use, either in face of the owner who contracted with him or of the new landowner. On the ground of invalidity the owner could take the land away from the tenant without any previous warning. At the same time, the

tenant could only terminate the contract if his earnings did not reach the sum of the fixed rent for two successive years, the payment of which was moreover his primary payment obligation stipulated in the regulation. The only right of tenants recognized by the Codex was the demand for compensation of useful investment made for soil improvement<sup>40</sup> In this way the law institutionalized the complete lack of protection of the tenant, his subordination to the land owner, the possibility of inordinate increase in the rent in kind while at the same time, in the case of a legal dispute, it openly took the side of the owner.

Objective authors note on the subject of the above legal regulation that in practice it was far from meaning that tenants were constantly harassed or lived in constant fear for their livelihood. (It is obvious that it was in the fundamental interest of the landowner too to ensure security for the producers' for the sake of the minimum of continuity in reproduction.) In the case of a bad harvest many owners exercised the landlord's right of reducing the rent and the majority of tenants were able to maintain their legal relationship even with contracts of unspecified duration or a change in ownership.<sup>41</sup> But at what price? The mere survival of the oppressed tenant depended on the mercy of the landowner. According to Kajita it was the hierarchic economic position sanctified by this law, the institutionalization of exploitation that determined the sociologically differing attitudes of the two partners in the rental contract: the downtrodden servilism on the side of the tenant and the paternalism carried over from the ancient order of values, the paternal superiority that also included care for the inferior on the part of the landlord.<sup>42</sup> Since the classical barter assumes a formal equality of values in the exchange of the producers' activities based on economic separation arising from a division of labour the linking of their different interests is only possible on the basis of a coordinate relationship, there can be no doubt than the Japanese land rent could only be a bourgeois legal relationship in form and even that was greatly distorted. The essential component in its content was the continued existence of the atavistic features of pseudo-feudalism. Literature and scholarly works contain a vast body of data showing that the Japanese peasant, the real martyr of the industrial revolution, was exploited by the Meiji tax system just as mercilessly as he had been by the age-old tax burden of the Asiatic mode of production. Despite the fact that he was widely recognized to be the most diligent worker in society, the land tenant was unable to rise from poverty because of

the small plots and the usurious rents. As a member of the poorest stratum, he was known disparagingly as a "half-hectare peasant" or "water-drinking peasant" (gotan byakusho, mizinomi byakusho) and he had to cope not only with his poverty but also with the disdain of society. Because of the crushing oppression his living conditions were closer to the fate of animals than to human fate, as described, for example, by the noted writer Soseki Natsume or the agrarian politician Yokota Hideo.<sup>43</sup>

From the turn of the century Japan's expansionist, aggressive foreign policy increased the exploitation of the agrarian proletariat even further, since imperialist wars of plunder required the creation of military potential and the strengthening of the industrial background and infrastructure. The First World War brought a political turn in the class struggle. The agricultural labourers and smallholders became increasingly politically aware and organized to oppose the increase of exploitation. Beside the antiimperialist peasant movements, it is a negative fact that the oppressed peasant masses unable to live from cultivating the land provided the "cannon fodder" for militarism: they escaped from their hopeless fate into the army that held out the promise of social prestige.

## 2. Technical and Economic Aspects of the Meiji Land Relations

The emergence of private land ownership even with the ballast of the patriarchal tax burden became a driving force that should not be underestimated for the growth of agricultural productivity. Since industrialization wholly tied down the state's investment activity financed by the funds extracted from the agrarian sector up to the turn of the century it played practically no role in financing or managing technical innovation in agriculture. Introducing the scientific and technical revolution in agriculture thus fell within the scope of the producers' activity and had to rely largely on the profit incentive of ownership appropriation. Some authors have attached too much importance to this basic fact: exaggerating the positive role of the agrarian oligarchy, they tend to forget that at the same time its parasitic appropriation became the biggest obstacle to progress. The profit orientation of the landlords undoubtedly accelerated the development of new production attitudes and the spread of modern farm management. However, since the state gradually took over these functions, their retrograde role arising from exploitative appropriation

became increasingly manifest as a brake on the efficiency of productivity.<sup>44</sup>

Three main factors in the process of modernization in Japanese agriculture in the past century are striking. These are: (a) technical and economic innovation was based on its own model; (b) the process was determined by social movement initiated "from below"; the majority of the entrepreneurs of the scientific and technical revolution came from the different strata of the peasantry; (c) the increasingly strong obstacles to development arose in a relatively early stage of modernization: technically these lay in the distortion of the agrarian structure (an outdated production and land ownership structure, the small size of units that reduced efficiency, etc.) and socially, in the parasitic nature of land ownership and land possession, the subordination of the tenant in a relationship of exploitation rather than the real guarantee of the security of production.

Let us examine these factors in more detail. On the basis of Eisenstadt's concept according to which social changes can be measured by the process of institutionalization,<sup>45</sup> we consider modernization in the social relations regarding land to be a version of development which in form is the strategy of catching up, that is, which is aimed at the accelerated closing of the gap, and in content is not based on external sources but asserts its own model of adjustment and innovation. The technical renewal of Japanese agriculture began not as an integral development on its own basis, but by copying a foreign model. From the eighties the official state policy strove to transplant into Japanese agriculture the successful elements of advanced American and European mechanized agrarian technology (e.g., crop rotation, large-scale stock breeding, large machines, the foreign experts required for technological adjustment, etc.). However, it soon became apparent that technological import was not a feasible path for Japanese agriculture: the methods of crop rotation and the mechanized technology of large units could not be harmonized with either the cultivation of rice by flooding or the structure of fragmented, small land ownership.<sup>46</sup> Although this swift defeat was accompanied by the decline of the state's innovative activity, it became a basic condition for the search for independent paths by the Japanese agrarian sector. In the final analysis, it was the subsequent development adaptive and innovative adjustment based on the Japanese social environment's own model that led to the results justifying the modernization of agriculture (by scientific standards too).

The real entrepreneurs of the Meiji "NOHO" innovation were the "veteran farmers" from the whole country and the ranks of the peasantry as a whole, that is, from among the smallholders with 1-2 hectares and from the even poorer strata. The spread of their production experiences and the exchange of information on technological methods was not the result of government support but of their own initiative. With the advance of commercial capital, their activity spread to an even wider range. They manifested a demand for innovation and efficiency in a number of branches of the agrarian sector. It was only from the turn of the century that the state gradually took over their role, setting up the modern experimental stations. Isobe sees the significance of their movement in that it promoted the integration, innovation and systematization of the differing Japanese technologies developed in various parts of the country. Its shortcoming however was that it did not reach a common denominator on anything and did not produce a rational standard. Consequently, it was left to the imported agrarian science to synthesize the different elements of the technologies of the veteran farmers.<sup>47</sup>

Isobe's case study also gives examples to characterize the technical development of the Meiji "NOHO". Such elements were the introduction of ploughing with horses that did not leave a margin of fallow land, the construction of joint power plants, the development of rice strains suited to the conditions. The state used the force of law to defend the new agro-technology of proven efficiency.<sup>48</sup>

One of the important organizational features of the agricultural modernization arising from the efforts of the peasantry was the organization of voluntary groups at the farmers' own initiative to promote innovation in production. The institution was naturally not without precedents: the collective consciousness of the age-old interdependence of the members of the village community even with the development of the division of labour was not only maintained but even strengthened by the cohesive strength of tradition in the new situation of economic challenges. The accumulation of material and intellectual capital and cooperation were dictated not simply by economic rationality but also by the constraint of survival: the state did not open a source for the creation of the agricultural infrastructure, and with the pitiless burden of taxation that made even simple reproduction difficult, the creation of such a source was impossible solely from individual accumulation. At the end of the century, a whole series of agricultural development societies (Mura Kanno-Kai)

were set up grouping all the members of the village community. The society studied by Isobe (which was set up in 1895) extended credit to members in need for the purchase of fertilizer, build the open-channel system of irrigation as a joint investment, thus ensuring the regulation of the water supply for all rice paddies, introduced the modern narrow-bed method of rice planting, and finally arranged the distribution of land required by the creation of the new irrigation and drainage system. Isobe showed the operation of the land ownership profit incentive within the farmers' independent group initiatives. However, the new, democratic face of the decision-making mechanism was in important aspect: while one of the landowner members of the society had 1,800 ha of land, those who initiated the decision came from the ranks of owners with approximately 4 hectares and share-farmers with 1-2 hectares. According to the author, this would have been inconceivable under the rule of the feudal aristocracy.<sup>49</sup>

The evolution of the total population, the agrarian population, the number of farm households and agricultural manpower between 1885 and 1923 together indicate the dynamic development trend of the agrarian sector. According to Isobe, this can be attributed to two factors: in part to the intensification of the intensity of work related to the "NOHO" innovation and in part to the development of the division of labour both within and outside agriculture. The latter process is also reflected in the disintegration of the patriarchal family model in the village communities. The work of the head of the family was limited to the management of the farm, while the actual production (ploughing, harvesting, etc.) was done by his heirs or by agricultural labourers. The opportunities for employment outside the sector grew together with the increase in rice yields (e.g., rice marketing, straw processing), providing the small producers with an opportunity for earnings in the off season too. In contrast to the farming of the pseudo-feudal age, the Meiji "NOHO" agriculture was characterized by deep ploughing using horses, well drained rice paddies, abundant use of fertilizer, spreading mechanization and the availability of the necessary manpower.<sup>50</sup>

What are the causes and factors that set the modernization of Japanese agriculture back right at the beginning of the growth path? One of them is obvious: the parasitic land ownership system. Kajita warns against regarding the Japanese land rent - as is evident in the American path of development - as the indicator of the modernization of Japanese land

relations. For the Meiji landowning system was semi-feudal.

The new class compromise of the Meiji state with the usual trick of legal sleight-of-hand brought "revolutionary change" merely at the abstract level of legal relations: it deprived the landowners of their feudal privileges, but only so that they could preserve their monopoly of exploitation in the reality of appropriation.<sup>51</sup> And in more than one respect the civil law outdid even its feudal forerunner in exporting and oppressing the peasant raised to the status of "tenant" (especially through the verbal rent contracts.) The land rent and the local special tax alone together took 75-80 per cent of the crop. Isobe points out that the parasitic land ownership, by extorting a high rent in kind, provided the farmers with a standard of living in no way better than that of the Middle Ages.<sup>52</sup> According to Wakukawa, this rent system was just as merciless as the mediaeval villeinage. He suggests that "the miserable condition of the tenant forced into debt, weighed down under debt, undernourished and living in a mean hut was without comparison."<sup>53</sup>

In addition to these facts, there is also the accelerating trend towards the monopoly of private land ownership on the basis of the relative scarcity of land. The social prestige of land ownership or of disposal of land is particularly high in countries which have remained within the framework of a subsistence economy or which are otherwise backward economically. However, it is Japan that provides the decisive proof that the nature of land ownership excluding others from appropriation on the basis of overpopulation and the growing shortage of land, as special social and natural conditions is capable of conserving the power exercised by the landowners over the other (non-owner) members of society over a historical period, even with steady economic growth and the creation of industrial society. The validity of this trend law is hardly affected by the fact that it arose right in the beginning of the historical course of the Meiji era, moreover in a clearly retrograde manner, as the "unhistorical" atavism of the Asiatic mode of production: similarly to the land relations of pseudo-feudalism, the size of the land holding determined the owner's social position and, in addition, the precapitalist hierarchical patriarchal relations which had been reproduced over the millenia according to the inherited order of appropriation between the landowners and the landless peasants, continued to exist.

The parasitic system of land ownership is in itself a too general causal factor to illustrate from within the "banking mechanism" of agricultural modernization. For numerous special

circumstances, as a combined cause, slowed down or excluded the realization of the possibilities for agrarian development in Japan. These were:

a) Technical and economic innovation for the return of investments, for the full utilisation of mechanization, for the raising of productivity with an increase in profits requires a modern structure of land ownership that assists technical progress. But under the "dictatorship" of the rent system the objective requirements of land unit size could not even find expression. Since, even without expansion of size or capital investment and without work the land rent guaranteed the landowner a high standard of living that could be attained with exploiting appropriation the marginal unit size above which the interests of the owner excluded cultivation structure and the increase of unit size alike, emerged at an early stage on the level of society as a whole. This land size was 5 cho, close to 5 hectares. The renting out of this area of land especially where the prices of land were sidely scattered and were divided among as many tenants as possible brought to owner an income equivalent to what he would have earned if he had farmed the land himself. On the basis of his analysis of the evolution of land rents and unit size between 1890 and 1937, Kajita regards the above corfelation as proven. He points out that this is one of the reasons why so few landowners in Japan cultivate more than 5 cho of land themselves.<sup>54</sup> The literature adds to this interrelationship the trend that the landowners strove to bring as many tenants as possible under their domination and for this purpose "atomized" the plots rented without any regard for the requirements of rational land utilisation. The widely scattered small plots enabled them to raise the marginal rent and force the tenants' share of the income down to the basic minimum.<sup>55</sup> The suboptimal character of land utilisation was intensified by the drastic withdrawal from the village communities of the common land, depriving the tenants of what had been a free source for the replacement of soil fertility (fodder, green manure).

(b) One of the obstacles to the modernization of land relations became the ambivalent response of state land policy to the increasingly acute class struggle. With the arrival of Japanese capital to the monopoly stage, from the end of the Meiji era the unbalanced development of agriculture and industry heightened the confrontation between owners and tenants. It became increasingly obvious for the tenants that the deterioration of the sectoral conditions of trade (sale of rice), together with the growing input in small-scale production,

depressed profitability to such a low basic minimum that it was impossible for them to throw off their poverty. Moreover, with the spread of commodity relations, the tenants became increasingly aware of the value of their own labour input. The awakening of the tenants' consciousness strengthened the growing disparity between the income relations of agriculture and industry. The growing number of rent disputes from the twenties (demands for the reduction of rent and the annulment of the cancellation of contracts) involved not only the tenants but also the small-owning (dual category) part-time farmers who still saw a social chance for advancement in the restriction of parasitic land ownership.

In such a situation, land policy opted for the demagogical idealization of the smallholder (*jisakuno*), in practice, latent price supports for the agrarian oligarchy, as the means of resolving the conflict. The 1921 Rice Law introduced a series of protectionist financial measures that over the longer term gave the producers an interest solely in rice production. This had a two-fold drawback. On the one hand, it deprived the poor peasants of numerous opportunities for work in agriculture, because of the standardized, one-sided development of marketing based on rice. On the other hand, it led to the increasing neglect of grain production which had been the main crop together with rice and to the predominance of rice as a monoculture.

(c) After the rapid growth of production, the new rice policy brought relative stagnation.<sup>56</sup> Isobe sees the reason for this - as a further obstacle to modernization as the change in fertilizer technology. While the Meiji "NOHO" expanded the range of traditional green manures (grass, compost, stable manure) with only a few forms of organic fertilizer (e.g., fish flour, oil-cake), from the middle of the Taisho period (1912-1925) the use of inorganic fertilizers (potassium, ammonium phosphate) became widespread. Their use on a growing scale reduced the quality of the crops (due to mildew, frost damage as a result of the late ripening, etc.). Attempts were made to eliminate these faults with improved strains rather than by changing the technology or structure of production. While the new sowing seed became tolerant to the copious use of artificial fertilizers, it continued to cause losses through mildew and crop collapse. In the final analysis, the new "NOHO" rejected the possibility of crop rotation offered by the scientific and technological revolution: it renounced the maintenance of soil fertility over the long term through the alternation of crops cultivated. Instead, it attempted

to maximize short-term output through the direct use of artificial fertilizers on the crops.

(d) The industrialization of agriculture and the scientific and technological revolution largely reversed the favourable process that had unfolded in the dynamic upward stage of the Meiji "NOHO" in the field of ensuring manpower capacity and in the differentiation of the division of labour. It became increasingly difficult to earn a livelihood from farming because of the high land prices and the land rents that impoverished the producer, so that the agrarian sector was obliged to bow to the strength of industry in attracting manpower. The fact that with the widespread use of artificial fertilizer and the growing mechanization (e.g., rice threshing machines), the opportunities for employment became increasingly limited in scope outside the peak seasons, also contributed to this. As a result, the division of labour established with the disintegration of the patriarchal family began to disappear: the family members could not find regular paid work in agriculture. And there were no economic incentives acting in the direction of expansion of unit size that with the creation of a modern production and plant structure could have tied down the labour of the permanent agricultural workers. The development of technology under such conditions accelerated the trend towards the growth of the number of owners working part-time, holding 1-2 hectares of land. Although the state-subsidised rice monoculture perpetuated on the scattered small plots did not ensure a living for these dual category owners, with the help of mechanization and agrotechnology, it made it increasingly possible for them to farm as a secondary occupation and to earn their main living in industry. This trend combined with the accumulated handicaps of the parasitic land ownership and the outdated structure of land possession swept Japanese agriculture into a deepening structural crisis in the thirties. A radical reform of land relations was thus imperative for further progress.

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