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## Studies of Chinese Peasant Society in Japan : Before and During World War II

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## **Studies of Chinese Peasant Society in Japan: Before and During World War II**

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### **Introduction**

This article describes and analyses the studies of Chinese peasant society conducted by the Japanese before and during World War II. The primary objective is to understand the purposes and the research methods of the studies, the ways in which the Japanese scholars viewed Chinese society, and how the context of war and colonialism influenced their research.

In writing this paper, I draw on the collections of books and journals in university libraries and research institutions in Japan. I also survey the materials preserved in the archives of Liaoning (遼寧省) and Jilin (吉林省) provinces in China that I was able to collect during three recent field trips to the region, and which document the research conducted by the Japanese in north-eastern China during the Manchukuo era.

Intensive studies of Chinese society by the Japanese started as Japan invaded the east and northeast of Asia. As the puppet state of Manchuria was established and the Japanese military penetrated deeper into China, research on Chinese society also expanded. Actually, there was a variety of Japanese individuals and organizations carrying out research on Chinese society. They included scholars in various fields, such as ethnology, sociology, economics, and law; government organizations in Manchuria; Japanese military intelligence; the research organizations of private companies; students of Kenkoku University (建國大學) and Daidō University (大同大學) in Manchuria; and even private individuals.

The studies by these individuals and organizations covered mainly the north and north-eastern parts of China and Taiwan. Many ethnic groups were studied, including both the Han Chinese who made up most of the population of China, and minority groups such as the Takasago (or aboriginal Taiwanese), Li, Korean, Mongol, and Oroqen.

The studies also covered an extensive range of research topics (see Table 1).

### **I. Identification of the research issues**

Different kinds of researchers saw the aim of their research differently, and so their work can be classified according to the purpose of the research as seen by the researchers themselves.

Firstly, surveys were carried out to assist the government or military in establishing policies to control newly occupied districts. For example, in an article on the history of the land system and tenant farming in Manchuria (TSUKUSHI 1939), which was based on a survey

**Table 1** Topics of studies on Chinese peasant society conducted by Japanese before and during the war

Field	Contents
District social history	History of local communities, changes in the administrative system, demography
Customs	Rituals, beliefs in Gods and demons, legends, prayers for rain, marriage, funerals
Land	Ownership and transfer of land, tenant farming, land tax
Farming	Agricultural work, crops, cultivation systems, livestock
Village finance	Financial system of villages, loan relations, transactions
The family	Structure of the family, inheritance and property, role of the head of the family, relations among family members
Kinship and lineage	Transmigration history of lineages, forms of residence, the authority of elders, ancestor worship
Village	Formation of village organizations, settlements and administrative villages, communal work for the village including building and repairing roads and bridges, rituals, education, justice within the village, maintenance of public order, social hierarchy and taxation

conducted by the Survey Office of the Manchurian Government, the official objective of the survey was stated as follows:

At present in Manchuria, against the background of numerous settlers migrating from Japan, the Manchurian Government's five-year plan for agriculture has brought about rapid development, and it is required to reconsider land problems. When the pages of history turn to a new era, it is our experience that one of the important and unavoidable measures is a reform of the land system. [...] Since the foundation of the country, the problem of land has always had a great influence on the political and economic systems. For that reason [...] the re-examination of the land system is necessary. The Manchurian Government has therefore promoted research on the land problem. (TSUKUSHI 1939: 3)

Another report on peasant society and tenancy based on a field survey also conducted by the Manchurian Government (Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushikikaisha 1937) emphasized on the opening page the importance of the survey in regard to the tenancy relations.

Among the various kinds of measures relating to agriculture in Manchuria, improvement of tenancy relations is a very important and urgent problem, as it will work to prevent popular unrest, to maintain soil productivity, and to increase production.

(Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushikikaisha 1937: 4)

Secondly, ethnological research was conducted for military purposes. The Institute of the Pacific (Taiheiyō Kyōkai, 太平洋協會) had functioned from before the war with the financial support of the navy, and the Minzoku Kenkyūjo (民族研究所, Ethnic or Nationality Research Institute), established in 1943, had a close relationship with the army. The central members of these research organizations carried out extensive fieldwork in various areas of Mainland China, such as the north, the northeast, and Hainan Island (NAKAO 1993: 232). Military intelligence agents also conducted surveys in order to collect information and win over the local people. For example, six military intelligence officials participated in the survey planned and conducted by the South Manchurian Railway Company in the north in 1936.

Another example concerns the Oroqen people (鄂倫春) who lived along the border between China and the Soviet Union and spoke both Chinese and Russian. The Kwantung Army (關東軍) understood well the situation of the people and made efforts to win them over (NAKAO 1993: 234-7).

Thirdly, surveys were carried out to open up and expand the business of companies. A typical case in point is the survey of old customs carried out by the South Manchurian Railway Company. The railway company attached great importance to field studies from its foundation, and its first large-scale survey concentrated on the system of land tenure. At that time, the land issue was regarded as being closely related to the profitability of the company. Based on this survey, a report was compiled in nine volumes (Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushikikaisha 1913-15). GOTŌ Shinpei (後藤新平), the founder and president of the company, stated the purpose of the survey as follows:

Since our railway business in Manchuria is managed in a territory controlled by the Qing Dynasty, we need to negotiate our commercial and civil rights with the Qing government, and also with private agents, and that is a complicated task. It may be profitable for us, providing we can persuade the Qing government and its people who know little about law. In order to succeed in negotiations, we must understand their old customs. (YAMADA 1977: 32)

The fourth kind of surveys were those that were carried out to understand the historical situation and the customs normally followed in China, where the Japanese were both fighting and establishing colonies. The large collection of documents in the archives of Liaoning and Jilin provinces shows that detailed information was collected, and that numerous books and pamphlets were published for the Japanese as guides to Chinese society. These publications covered a broad variety of topics, such as previous administrative systems, ethnic groups, religion, customs, legends, folk songs, and local records.

Meticulous information was collected regarding the system for administering agricultural villages. For example an administrative study published by the Kyowa Association (協和會) (Kyōwakai 1934) and preserved in the diplomatic archives of Japan, contained almost all the administrative laws that were proclaimed by the government of the Republic of China from the year after its foundation (1912) to 1929 concerning the prefectures and smaller administrative divisions down to the level of local communities. It also included a Japanese translation.

The fifth kind of research was the so-called academic research. A typical example of this was a collaborative study of former customs carried out by the South Manchurian Railway Company and the Imperial University of Tokyo in the north in the years from 1940 to 1944. I will examine this collaborative study in more detail in the next section. Although it was claimed to be academic research, HATADA Takashi (旗田巍), one of the academic members of the research team, stated:

This collaborative study was carried out in the areas occupied by the Japanese military, and assisted by the power of the colonial management company. Therefore, it is obvious that this is a colonial survey.

Nevertheless, he continued,

The planners of the study required that the findings of the research should be useful for wartime administration, but the scholars who conducted the survey made an effort to promote purely academic investigations [...] In the years when the study was conducted, this kind of assertion was regarded as unhelpful to the war effort, and a clash of opinion between the planners and the academics was inevitable, but finally, thanks to serious effort by the scholars, the academic position prevailed. (HATADA 1973: 263-4).

It was after the war that the result of the collaborative study was finally published in six volumes by Iwanami-shoten (Chūgoku Nōson Kankō Chōsa Kankōkai 1952-8).

## II. Academic studies

Having outlined the types of studies of Chinese society conducted by the Japanese before and during the war, I would like to examine academic studies in more detail.

### *Surveys conducted by the South Manchurian Railway Company*

The South Manchurian Railway Company had carried out several previous surveys in the years preceding the collaborative survey with the Imperial University of Tokyo mentioned in the previous section. The first of these was conducted in April-May 1936. Thirty members of the company's survey section, a company researcher, and men from military intelligence participated in the research. They visited twenty-five villages in sixteen prefectures, and collected basic data on them.

The second survey was carried out by the Tianjin (天津) Office of the South Manchurian Railway Company in February-March 1937. They investigated four villages in four prefectures. The survey was concerned with property in land, employment, crops, trades, tax revenues, capital, income, and expenditures.

The third survey was made in 1937-1939. The Tianjin office dispatched a Chinese investigator, who stayed in a village for a long period and collected detailed data on fourteen farmhouses. The data were concerned with income and expenditure, crops, working hours, and fertilizers. The data were compiled into three volumes of statistics, (Minami Manshū Tetsudō Kabushikikaisha 1938-41; cf. HUANG 1985: 32-6).

### *The purpose of the collaborative study*

The collaborative study by the South Manchurian Railway Company and the Imperial University of Tokyo was carried out in eight villages in six prefectures of the North. The areas covered by the survey included various items relating to both villages and households, such as agricultural work, land ownership, exchange of land, tenant farming, land tax, irrigation, flood control, crops, financial systems, debt relationships, lineages, and the family.

SUEHIRO Gentarō (末弘嚴太郎), the leader of the survey, later recalled its purpose as follows:

Our duty was not to investigate the structural form of social relations, but rather the legal

model that regulated social relations. For example, when we surveyed the composition of families, the primary focus of investigation was not the external factors such as the number of members, residential patterns and so on, but the conscious model that was held by the people and that regulated the authority, order and relationship from within the family.

He emphasized that for this purpose the reality had to be captured and represented vividly, just as it was (SUEHIRO 1952: 18).

### ***Method of the study***

The main methods used in the study were as follows:

- a. The survey group intensively investigated a small number of villages from every angle, but at the same time they presented a bird's eye view of general conditions over a wider area.
- b. The investigators collected data during short visits to each village, but did not conduct participant observation.
- c. The investigators primarily collected quantitative data on farmhouses and villages. This is also the case with other surveys conducted by the South Manchurian Railway Company. The third survey in particular, which, as I mentioned above, was conducted by the Tianjin office from 1937 to 1939, was described by the Chinese-American economic historian Philip C. C. Huang as 'undoubtedly the most detailed ever compiled on any single group of village households in Chinese history' (HUANG 1985: 35).
- d. Local records of institutions and laws were collected about one year prior to the survey. This method was used unchanged throughout the surveys conducted by the South Manchurian Railway Company.

### ***Publication of the study***

Both the investigators of the South Manchurian Railway Company and the scholars of the Imperial University of Tokyo published many survey reports and academic books on the basis of the original survey data. A comprehensive list of the published materials was included in the first volume of the final report. This report was followed by other publications based on the original data, such as IMAHORI Seiji (今堀誠二) (1953) and HATADA Takashi (1973).

### ***Post-war evaluations of the collaborative study***

After the war, the collaborative study was criticized in various ways by academic specialists, some of whom pointed out that it was a survey of a colony carried out during a war in which it was completely impossible for investigators to build relations of trust with the peasants whom they investigated. So the validity of the data collected was questioned (NAKAO 1990: 87).

Despite these negative comments, the survey has been regarded as valuable in providing detailed information on a broad variety of topics concerning village and peasant society, and offering precious insights into the actual conditions of Chinese society in the 1930s and 40s.

The collaborative survey was also seminal in stimulating a small number of later scholars to make use of its data, conduct follow-up research in the same areas from more modern viewpoints, and publish monographs. For example, *The power structure and social change*

in Chinese village, by NAKAO Katsumi (中生勝美), was based on fieldwork in Shandong Province (山東省) (NAKAO 1990); and *Society and popular culture in modern China: Report of a Sino-Japanese collaborative study of rural society in North China*, edited by SASAKI Mamoru (佐々木衛), was based on fieldwork carried out mainly in Hebei Province (河北省) (SASAKI, ed. 1992).

Elsewhere, SASAKI evaluated the collaborative study of the South Manchurian Railway Company and the Imperial University of Tokyo from the point of view of the five years' fieldwork he himself conducted in the North. Japanese researchers who conducted village studies in China used to presuppose the existence of certain conspicuous features of Japanese villages, such as the *dōzoku* (同族) structure, the relation of *oyabun-kobun* (親分子分), and strong and coherent social units as a standard with which their findings on Chinese villages were compared and contrasted. This made it impossible to understand the real structure of relationships in Chinese society. For example, representing the village as a cohesive unit is a typically Japanese way of thinking. In contrast, Sasaki refers to the Chinese scholar FEI Xiaotong (費孝通) to make a point that the Japanese scholars failed to see:

To understand Chinese social structure, it is not the collective structure, but the personal network that has a more important meaning. (SASAKI 1992: 12-3)

### *Evaluation from outside Japan*

In *The research activities of the South Manchurian Railway Company 1907-1945: A history and a bibliography* (1966), John Young presented a comprehensive overview of the surveys carried out by the company, and listed all its publications. Ramon Myers analysed the data of the collaborative study, reconstructed the social-economic structure of the agricultural economy and villages, and published his results under the title *The Chinese peasant economy: Agricultural development in Hopei and Shantung 1890-1949* (Myers 1970). In his study of changes in the village structure and the agricultural economy of China, *The peasant economy and social change in North China* (1985), Philip C. C. Huang made extensive use of the collaborative study, together with material from the Beijing archives. A Chinese version was also published a year after the original English version. In his book, Huang praises the collaborative study, but at the same time he pointed out some limitations. The study provided detailed information about various aspects of villages and households. This information is so rich and reliable that more elaborate economic and anthropological research on the village or the household can be based on it. Compared with this collaborative study, many other surveys conducted in the 1920s and 1930s failed to see the wood for the trees. Huang also points out that, even though the study was carried out with the cooperation of the Japanese occupation forces, academics standards were maintained. When Huang did a follow-up survey in the same village, he realized how accurate the data collection and analysis had been. He also noted the favourable, even sympathetic attitudes of the Japanese investigators towards the peasants.

However, Huang also pointed out some of the limitations of the study. Participant observation was not conducted. The investigators only visited each village for a few days. They interviewed villagers, but did not live together with them and observe them in detail.

Their survey was mediated by interpreters, so that the investigators did not communicate directly with the villagers. The investigation was primarily concerned with concrete social-economic phenomena, but the conscious, ideational aspects of life were not addressed. The informants were chosen mainly from among the wealthy landowners, landowning farmers, and people of high social status. Therefore, the information obtained was inevitably one-sided and biased (HUANG 1984: 32-43).

### III. The view of the Japanese researcher

In this section I will focus on two Japanese researchers, analyse the results of their research on Chinese villages, and compare them with the views of Chinese scholars.

#### *Studies of the village and peasant society of China by Chinese scholars*

Many Chinese scholars also carried out research on Chinese village and peasant society in the 1930s and 1940s. In order to compare the research by Chinese scholars with that by Japanese, I shall examine some well-known studies by Chinese scholars.

LI Jinghan (李景漢), who was also known as Franklin C. H. Lee, and his colleagues began an investigation of general social conditions in Ding Prefecture (定縣) in the north in the latter half of the 1920s, and published *Ting Hsien: A social survey* in 1933. LI and his colleagues spent almost five years studying various aspects of social life in Ding Prefecture. In their survey they planned to collect information on sixteen topics: geography, history, politics, population, the family, education, sanitation, recreation, religious beliefs, customs, relief work, traffic and transportation, agriculture, levels of living, industries, and commerce.

FEI Xiaotong carried out fieldwork in Kaixuangong (開弦弓) Village, Wujiang Prefecture (吳江縣), Jiangsu Province (江蘇省), in 1936, and wrote his doctoral thesis entitled *Peasant life in China: A field study of country life in the Yangtze Valley* based on this. It was published in England in 1939 (FEI 1939). He also studied villages in Yunnan Province (雲南省) with the help of colleagues, and published three books in Chinese, *Farmland of Lu Village*, *Handicraft industry of Yi Village* and *Agriculture and commerce of Yu Village* (FEI 1943a, 1943b, 1943c).

In the 1940s, LIN Yaohua (林耀華) published his famous book *The golden wing: A sociological study of Chinese familism* (LIN 1947). In that book, he documented the real life history of two peasant families, who lived in Huang (黃) Village Gutian Prefecture (古田縣), Fujian Province (福建省), the village in which LIN himself had been born. Through the vicissitudes of the two families, he described social life at different levels of society, from the local village and prefectural town to the provincial capital. In the account, he provided a broad survey of different aspects of life, such as agriculture, water transport, commerce, education, etiquette and customs, law, lineage, the family, religion, and the position of women.

The studies by Chinese scholars differ from those carried out by the Japanese in the following ways.

- a. Each study was confined to a single village or prefecture. Chinese scholars preferred an



- intensive study concentrated on one place to a broad survey extending over several places.
- b. Chinese scholars stayed in the areas they investigated for a long period in order to carry out participant observation and statistical surveys. By living together with the people, they observed their daily lives and documented the life histories of individuals scrupulously.
  - c. They tackled their research with a strong sense of social responsibility. As Li Jinghan wrote, his study was not one 'conducted by a pure academic. It is not for academics, either. It is undertaken for practical purposes, that is, for solutions of social problems.' In Li's view, ignorance, poverty, and selfishness were the fatal weaknesses of Chinese society, and education was the most powerful means to solve those problems. To carry out education most effectively, educators had to understand the people and society through empirical surveys. (LI 1986: 1-2)

FEI Xiaotong stated that his village studies in Jiangsu and Yunnan Provinces had a consistent theme, and that was the influence of modern industry on rural communities. He thought that the difficulties peasants suffered from poverty were closely related to the decline of handicraft industries in the rural areas, and the decline was caused by modern industry penetrating into rural society. As was the case with LI Jinghan, FEI wanted to find a solution to the problem of poverty through understanding the influence of modern industry (FEI 1943a: 1-7).

In tracing the histories of the two families, LIN Yaohua hoped to clarify the causes of the difficulties of peasant families and reach a deeper understanding of peasant society.

#### *HATADA's village study*

When the Japanese researchers studied villages in China, they paid considerable attention to villages' boundaries, to which Chinese scholars were more or less indifferent. HATADA was one of the best-known members of the joint South Manchurian Railway Company and the Imperial University of Tokyo research team. In his extensive studies of peasant society in China, he, too, focused his attention on these boundaries.

He considered that social organization, land, and the village boundary were related to each other. The organization of a village is the precondition for the existence of land within that village; that is to say that, if there is no organization, there is no land. Conversely, the limit of the village land is the boundaries of the area controlled by the village. If the characteristics of the boundaries and the land are prescribed by the nature of social organization, perhaps it is possible to understand the characteristics of the social organization through an understanding of the land and the boundaries. This viewpoint was the theoretical premise upon which HATADA investigated villages in China (HATADA 1973: 57-8).

He approached the village boundary from three perspectives, as the boundary of '*kanqingde*' (看青的, a person guarding agricultural products), as the unit of tax collection, and as the extent of pasturage. In his survey, HATADA noted contradictions which existed between villages. Although there was no clear boundary between neighbouring villages, the villagers had a clear notion of village membership. However, land belonging to different villages was confused together because of land transactions between peoples of different villages. The separation of landowner and tenants also resulted in a tangled distribution of lands.

The status of 'villager' includes many rights, such as the right to participate in rituals, to use public property, and to establish fictive kinship within the village. HATADA attempted a comparative analysis based on the data from the collaborative studies. He found that the nature of village boundaries and the rights of villagers were related to each other. In villages where villagers were not concerned with the village boundaries, the criteria for village membership were also vague. On the other hand, in villages where the boundary was a matter of strong concern, the criteria for village membership were easy to grasp. His analysis showed that this phenomenon was closely related to the lineage system. In villages where the criteria for membership were difficult to grasp, lineages showed strong solidarity and there were many landed farmers. As another related factor, there was only a low degree of stratification within the village. Therefore, even though people belonging to alien lineages would find it difficult to become villagers, they could still buy land from villagers who owned it.

HATADA concluded that village consciousness was supported by lineage consciousness. As the market economy gradually penetrated and transactions in land increased, some landed farmers were ruined and became tenant farmers. Almost simultaneously, lineages became disorganized, and villagers' sense of belonging gradually melted away. At this stage, more attention was paid to the boundaries of village lands, primarily for the sake of tax collection (HATADA 1973: 57-167). HATADA's research showed how social integration based on blood relationships gives way to relationships based on shared territory.

On the other hand, HATADA tended to regard the village structure found in Japan as his point of reference and he tried to apply it to Chinese villages. He observed that some villages had no clear boundaries. He thought that this showed that the Chinese village was still immature as a system of local community (HATADA 1973: 121). In other words, he made the boundary the criterion of village maturity. Moreover, even though HATADA described the process of the transformation of social integration inside the village from a blood relationship to a territorial relationship, he did not touch on how this process could be observed concretely, in people's actions.

#### *IMAHORI's village study*

IMAHORI published *The social structure of China*, in which he analysed the relation between the village and the nation, in 1953. He used data from the collaborative study, and other materials, such as local historical records. He examined various public activities in villages, and the ways in which they operated, and he analysed the relationship between the national government and the villages, and particularly how the national government became involved in these activities. He studied a wide range of activities in the village such as ceremonies to pray for rain, the ritual extermination of harmful insects and plagues, charity, religious rituals, trials of wrongdoers, school education, construction of roads and bridges, flood control, and irrigation. His conclusion can be summarized in two points. Firstly, the national government gave no substantial aid to any public activities organized in the villages. Secondly, besides the official taxation, the government actually levied semi-legal taxes on the villages, and leading villagers made a great profit through cooperation with the government's levy.

I would say that he analysed the relation between the nation and the village through the way in which public activities in the village operated, and he showed how they were related in concrete terms. However, we must not lose sight of what he thought the village should be and what the government should do. He implicitly compared them with similar institutions in Japanese society. He therefore paid much attention to external aspects like taxation, administrative intervention by the government, and material support. In contrast, Chinese scholars paid more attention to factors inherent in the social integration of Chinese society. For example, FEI Xiaotong called peasant and mass society in China an 'etiquette and custom' society, meaning that Confucian ethics and morals have filtered deeply into the peasant society, regulating peasants' lives, customs and social actions (FEI 1947).

## Conclusion

Needless to say, the studies of Chinese society conducted by the Japanese – especially those carried out by academics, before and during World War II – left a valuable body of records and research data about various aspects of Chinese society. This material enabled researchers to make comparisons over time, and also encouraged much further research. At the same time, I would like to present some comments on these studies from the standpoint of the present, more than fifty years after the end of the war, and also from the point of view of a cultural anthropologist who was born and grew up in China.

Firstly, in order to carry out research on another people, one should take into account both their actions and their perceptions and ways of thinking. Few Japanese researchers have considered the latter.

Secondly, research on a society should integrate two kinds of approach, a micro-level approach that classifies research objects and investigates each object in detail, and a macro-level approach that tries to understand the broader context in which these objects exist in complex relations with each other. Japanese researchers have had a tendency to classify research objects minutely, but they have rarely attempted synthetic analyses. HATADA and IMAHORI, for example, classified the social life of villages in various ways. Needless to say, classification is helpful to academic research, but if one just classifies research objects minutely but does not correlate them with one another, one runs the risk of failing to see the wood for the trees.

In order to understand another society, one should also investigate both social relations and the people themselves. Japanese researchers have concentrated on the former, but have seldom considered fate, emotion, values, and religion among the Chinese. They failed to understand the Chinese people as human beings. I would say that Japanese researchers did not achieve an understanding of Chinese society to the extent of recognizing the meanings that social practices have for individual members and determining the parts these meanings play within the context of the Chinese culture as a whole.

Thirdly, even though Japanese researchers emphasized that academic standards were maintained, the fact is that those studies were carried out within the environments of colonialism, military occupation, and warfare. Japanese scholars conducted research only under the protection of the armed forces. The villagers they investigated were actually

compelled to cooperate with the investigation and provide answers as informants. In emphasizing their own academic standpoint, my own view is that the researchers ignored their position as invaders and did not consider the deep gap between the invaders and the victims of aggression.

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