Feudalism and Class Power in Rural Manchukuo

The Japanese rule over Manchuria occupies a somewhat confused place in historiography, as it defies any simple attempts to collapse it into one easy category or another. Some authors have focused on the development of the Manchukuo industrial and bureaucratic apparatus, while others emphasize the crudeness and brutality of its agrarian policy. This paper analyzes the contradiction between the rationalizing impulses of Manchukuo economic planners, and the reality of the perpetuation or even strengthening of a feudal rural political economy, as well as a regression towards primitive, labor-intensive farming techniques. I identify the crux of the contradiction as the Manchukuo government's reliance on landlords and local elites to enforce stability in the countryside, a reliance which hampered the government's ability to affect meaningful progressive reforms which would have undermined the feudal power of those same landlords.

The large-scale industrialization which occurred in Manchuria, particularly in the later war years, coexisted alongside an essentially feudal relationship to labor and land. Even in industry, labor was supplied by a semi-feudal system of subcontracting, the *batou* system. The Japanese did move during the later war years to exert greater control and rationalization over industrial labor, although this success was only partial.[1] By contrast, as we will discuss shortly, its agrarian policy degenerated into open violence and extortion. While it is true that Manchuria was a major exporter of soybeans even before it came under more direct Japanese control in 1931, we should not reflexively associate the production of cash crops with a "modern" class structure. The procurement of soybeans was incentivized by market integration which ensured

[1] Mo Tian, "Japanese Rule Over Rural Manchukuo: Strategies and Policies" (Australian National University, 2015), 155–56.

the financial dependence of smallholding peasants on merchants, rather than large-scale rational agricultural investments.[2] Even as the profits from this trade were used to fund modern military-industrial endeavors, it was subcontracted petty merchants who were responsible for purchasing soybeans from farmers and collecting them in warehouses, from which they could be shipped in bulk.[3]

The Manchukuo government was never able to establish a strong hold over its agrarian population, instead ruling indirectly via local officials and elites. Mo observes that "The Japanese authorities were only able to control a small proportion of the labour force in Manchukuo. Japanese labour control did not extend to the majority of the rural population. In general, the Japanese authorities lacked both experience and time to create ruling mechanisms in rural areas that could suit the social, political, and economic conditions of rural areas."[4]

It is tempting to dismiss Japanese policy in rural Manchukuo as simply regressive and feudal. Indeed, the already poor agricultural productivity in the pre-war era,[5] combined with the disruptions created by the occupation, resulted in widespread famine and depopulation. With the outbreak of war in 1937, and a reprioritization of heavy industry, government investment in an already-struggling agricultural sector dropped by 9%. Qiunan Li makes the point that by 1940, the simple mathematics did not add up. The government aimed to requisition 7 million tons of grain, out of 18 million tons produced total, when 12 million was needed to maintain the already

[2] Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 49.
[3] Tian, "Japanese Rule Over Rural Manchukuo: Strategies and Policies," 118.
[4] Tian, 169.
[5] Tian, 39.

extremely low standard of living of the population. In the face of peasant resistance to grain requisitions at pitiful exchange rates, the government increasingly resorted to brute violence.[6]

But by all accounts, it seems that the Manchukuo government took agrarian reform seriously, both politically and economically. The Great Depression hit Manchuria's cash crop economy hard. In response to a turn towards subsistence farming, the Manchurian government promoted alternative cash crops, and promoted both the expansion of cultivated area and the adoption of fertilizer and modern farming implements.[7] The five year plan ratified in December of 1936 set aside sums of "2.58 billion yuan: industry and mining (iron, coal, fuel, electric power, aluminum, gold, lead, salt and automobile), 1.39 billion yuan; transportation and communication (railway, telecommunication, telephone, highway), 0.77 billion yuan; and the [remaining] 0.42 billion yuan for agriculture, animal husbandry, and immigration."[8] While clearly not a pressing strategic priority compared to the heavy industry needed to fuel Japan's war machine, agricultural investment was still 16% of industrial investment, which is non-negligible given the size of that larger figure.

However, it would seem that that this agricultural investment failed to meaningfully better the financial situation for poor peasants. Mo Tian demonstrates that the financial cooperatives used to distribute these investments in the form of loans favored lending to large landlords and wealthy peasants, ultimately concluding that, "[given] the prevalence of mutual

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[6] Qiunan Li, "Everyday Life in the Puppet State: A Study of Ordinary People's Experiences in Manchukuo" (The University of Sheffield, 2018), 158–60.
[7] Tian, "Japanese Rule Over Rural Manchukuo: Strategies and Policies," 116–17.
[8] Hai Zhao, "Manchurian Atlas: Competitive Geopolitics, Planned Industrialization, and the Rise of Heavy Industrial State in Northeast China, 1918-1954" (University of Chicago, 2015), 118–19, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1750090001?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses.

borrowing in rural financial activities, it is difficult to claim that the reach of cooperatives into rural finance had been comprehensive."

Furthermore, the corruption and usury of village elites was clearly an issue which was at the forefront of the government. For instance, the *Shengjing Shibao* printed in 1937 on its front page a short piece decrying the very issue of corruption of village chiefs.[9] The North China Herald reported in 1934 that even Japanese officials were taking advantage of their positions for their own gain, never mind the large number of local Manchurians enlisted for low level office.[10] And even in internal Japanese documents, it was stated clearly that "The semi-feudalistic nature of Manchuria is exhibited in the collusion of army and police personnel, local gentry, and the commercial class."[11] But it was nonetheless this semi-feudal coalition which was responsible for upholding Japanese rule in the countryside.

Below I will refer extensively to the work of Chong-Sik Lee. His report, *Counterinsurgency In Manchuria: The Japanese Experience, 1931-1940* contains a large number of translated internal documents. The first one is "Collective Hamlets," published in a larger report, "Study of Domestic Security Measures" by the Military Advisory Section in 1937. Additionally, a number of shorter documents such as "Propaganda and Pacification Activities in Tungpientao" are referenced within this work. Note should be made that conditions described in these documents may not necessarily be indicative of broader conditions in Manchukuo, as the collective hamlets were a targeted program, mainly aimed at majority-Korean populations in poorly-controlled hinterland regions. However, our other sources have made clear, that, even if

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[9] 中島真雄, *盛京時報 1937.06.09*, 1937, http://archive.org/details/shengjing-shibao-1937.06.09.
[10] "CORRUPTION IN MANCHOUKUO: Japanese Officials Gravely Concerned: Peasants Onuressed and Driven to Brigandage," *The North - China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette (1870-1941)*, June 27, 1934.
[11] Chong-Sik Lee, *Counterinsurgency in Manchuria: The Japanese Experience, 1931-1940*, 1967, 238, http://archive.org/details/DTIC_AD0648873.

conditions were better in other parts of Manchukuo, it was not by much, and the overall situation in rural Manchukuo was extremely dismal.

The central government was constantly struggling against the malign influence of local elites, and their own documents make it clear that they considered such elites untrustworthy. In a report on activities in Tungpientao, it was written that: "When seed or cash are distributed to the villagers, it is necessary to deliver the items directly to the villagers rather than entrust the task to the head of the village, the head of the police detachment, or other influential persons in the village. It is, however, *absolutely necessary* to bring influential persons (elders of the villages, persons held in respect, and able young men) to the fore among the villagers and praise them in front of the farmers if their support is to be obtained and their power is to be utilized" [emphasis mine].[12] Just these two sentences speak volumes. The Manchukuo government was clearly aware of its dependence on influential local figures for the exercise of power in rural Manchuria. And yet, these intermediaries could not be trusted to carry out a task as simple as cash or seed distribution. This was important because, in the same document, it was written that:

"In order to prevent the mobilization of the farmers by the insurgents… it is necessary to allocate sufficient security forces until the security condition is stabilized; at the same time, political, economic, and ideological activities must be carried out. In short, propaganda and pacification activities must accompany economic activities designed to accelerate the dissolution of feudalistic economic relationships."[13]

[12] Chong-Sik Lee, 248.
[13] Chong-Sik Lee, 246.

As such, the Manchukuo authorities were in a bind. They wanted to enact economic reforms to increase revenue and stabilize the countryside. However, to do so, they would have to undermine the very classes on which their rule was based.

The collective hamlets are an interesting if tragic episode in this history and revealing of Japanese intentions. Despite the actual outcome of the program, it is nonetheless clear that the counterinsurgency program in Manchuria attempted at least some reforms which targeted the feudal class relations which we have seen above. Indeed, the collective hamlet system presented the government with an opportunity to revolutionize social relations. "Collective Hamlets," translated by Chong-Sik Lee, states that:

"In the event that the collective hamlets are constructed on wasteland owned by nonfarming landlords, the necessary land should be purchased by the government at forced sales. The land should then be offered for sale to the farmers, with tenant farmers given priority. No such provision has been made in the present programs for reclaiming land. If it is impossible to carry out the program to the point of producing actual economic results, it is still desirable to aim at political effects."[14]

Although the collective villages turned out to be anything but collective, it seems undeniable that there was genuine to ameliorate the feudal conditions of rural life and promote production among peasants. As published in in the China Review Weekly, the legislation put forth stated:

[14] Chong-Sik Lee, 182.

"(2) That the Ministry shall provide each village with necessary funds and that all its activities shall be directed by an agricultural expert, appointed to that specific task by provincial administration.

(3) That these funds, advanced by the Treasury, shall be expended only for the purpose of communal agricultural implements, live stock and seeds and for the establishment of communal workshops of handicraft."[15]

While there does appear to be indication that the Japanese managed to address some of the concerns of the peasantry in collective villages, this is almost certainly outweighed by the deprivations inflicted by the forced relocation of millions of peasants. After the relocation, while previously the bulk of tenant farmers paid around 50% of their harvest to their landlords, after the relocation, most of them paid around 30%. Alongside this fee reduction, the amount of labor performed by tenant farmers for their landlords outside of the tax on their produce was reduced as well.[16]

This, however, does not tell us very much about the actual quality of life of the peasantry in collective villages. This decrease in landlord fees may have been offset by increased labor demands, officially or unofficially, by the government, or by lowered absolute productivity. We know that migration was extremely harsh on the peasantry. Another document translated by Lee, "The Collective Hamlets in Chientao Province," demonstrates this at length. Total area under cultivation decreased slightly in Chientao province, and average cultivated area per family decreased by 24%. The ownership rates of draft animals, carts, and plows, too, decreased

[15] "Japanese Army, Like Soviets, Enforces Collective Farming," *The China Weekly Review (1923-1950)*, May 16, 1936.
[16] Chong-Sik Lee, *Counterinsurgency in Manchuria*, 118–19.

significantly. The decrease in the amount of cattle was most significant, with the number of cattle falling by nearly half.[17] The number of small landholding farmers decreased, and the number of tenant farmers increased. The distance from the farmers' residences to the fields increased. And, of course, the farmers had to themselves construct the new collective hamlets in which they lived.

Many of these issues either exacerbated or were consequences of the heavy debt load on the peasantry. Many of them were already indebted before the forced migration, when they were forced to incur further debts from the government for "the construction of houses and for agrarian capital." The requirements to service this debt caused them to take further loans, driving them further into debts.[18]

Additionally, the massive absolute drop in the quantity of cattle, in proportion to other metrics which changed by less dramatic amounts, must be given special consideration. It seems reasonable to conclude that numerous draft animals were killed and eaten during this period, either because of an absolute food shortage or because the farmers could not afford to continue feeding their animals. One individual reported that his family even had to rent seeds and grain from the landlord. Every year, after public taxes had been deducted, and the rented seeds and grain were returned, there was no surplus, and they would have to rent again.[19]

In short, for each of the factors of production listed in the legislation: agricultural tools, livestock, and seeds, access and ownership of peasants to these factors of production not only failed to increase but decreased. This general trend was noted as a "trend towards bankruptcy,

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[17] Chong-Sik Lee, 111.
[18] Chong-Sik Lee, 183.
[19] Qi Hongshen. "Jiànzhèng rìběn qīn huá zhímín jiàoyù" 见证日本侵华殖民教育 [Witness Japan's Invasion and Colonial Education of China]. Shenyang: Jianghai Publishing House, 2005, 165.

which is resulting in cruel and excessive use of human labor, and in primitive farming."[20] In contrast to the litany of destructive aspects of the collective hamlet program, the report only lists 2 progressive aspects: "(1) reduction in the rate of tenant fees and (2) abolition of feudalistic arbitrary burdens on the tenants." However, as demonstrated by other sources, the collective hamlet program seems to have scarcely changed the economic and political power of landlords in rural areas and may even have retrenched it.

How can we explain the divergence of Japanese policy intentions with actual outcomes? As stated in in government documents, "the construction of collective hamlets and the reclamation of abandoned land provide excellent opportunities for reforming the tenant system because these activities are carried out forcibly under the power of the state."[21] Why was the collective hamlet system, and more broadly, the Manchurian agrarian policy, such an economic disaster?

The political importance of landlords within the *baojia* system has been well-studied elsewhere. Mo Tian writes that "The baojia system in practice relied heavily on the mediating role of local elites and it reinforced the position of those elites. These elites were usually landlords or rich peasants who had the experience of working as officials in county government, businessmen, educators and police officers."[22] Thus, these wealthy members of the community occupied a commanding position in both economics and politics. It was these local elites which enforced the stability of rural Manchukuo, as the *baojia* system was not merely administrative, but served the essential role of organizing local self-defense forces against bandits.

[20] Chong-Sik Lee, *Counterinsurgency in Manchuria*, 110.
[21] Chong-Sik Lee, 181.
[22] Tian, "Japanese Rule Over Rural Manchukuo: Strategies and Policies," 72.

Given the level of feudal collusion between local elites acknowledged by the Japanese, and their prominent role in local government, we should expect that policies which directly contradicted landlord interests to be obeyed loosely at best. And indeed, this does seem to be the case. The reduction of rent rates was one of the major concerns of the Manchukuo government in ensuring the amelioration of conditions of the poor peasantry. But "Collective Hamlets" states that "There is an inherent tendency for tenant fees to rise up to the limits set forth by law. If the regulations concerning farm rent are loose, it is obvious that the fees will surge even higher. The landlords exert strong pressure and often tend to step over the limits set forth by the authorities."[23] As expected, laws could hardly be expected to be enforced when they contradicted the interests of those enforcing them. However, the Manchukuo government had no real way to shake itself free of this dependence of feudal elites.

The Mount Tulong incident is an excellent of this dependence. Below, we rely on Zhuang Yuanfang's interpretation of the events, in his work *Perversions of the Capitalist Fantasy: The Agrarian Question and Japanese Colonialism in Manchuria*. The proximal cause of the Mount Tulong incident was a policy set by the Kwantung Army to "regulate and register the circulation of guns" in each *baojia* community. Combined with the threat of expropriation of land by Japanese colonizers, "Peasants understood this policy as a signal of the Japanese army to suppress potential resistance movements in the face of the armed Japanese immigration."[24] This led to a rebellion under the leadership of Xie Wendong, who was a local *baojia* leader, who fought alongside the communist insurgency for some years before surrendering to the Japanese and returning to the Japanese fold as a local bureaucrat. The instability within the Manchurian

[23] Chong-Sik Lee, *Counterinsurgency in Manchuria*, 170.
[24] Yuanfang Zhang, "Perversions of the Capitalist Fantasy: The Agrarian Question and Japanese Colonialism in Manchuria" (University of Toronto, n.d.), 174.

countryside made the threat of defection of local elites over to the side of communist or nationalist fighters very real. It was therefore necessary to continuously maintain the allegiance of local elites.

Another example of Japanese military dependence on local elites is depicted in the novel "Village in August," which was written during the period of Japanese rule and follows the journey of a band of Communist insurgents. This is a fictional account, but nonetheless serves to help us understand the conditions of the period. One such scene from this novel exemplifies how landlords were perceived at the time, and their role not just economically, but as agents of Japanese rule. Within this novel, Third Master Wang, though he is reviled as "White-Faced Villain" behind his back, commands a position of authority within the village, and organizes his tenants to defend the village against the communists, with his family's personal armaments. He additionally dispatches a messenger to the "Bandit Suppression Headquarters."[25] Note that at the village level, there is no police presence, and the first line of defense is the organized by the local elites.

For many peasants, given the general state of poverty within the countryside, landlords were a source of not just military but social security. In times of extreme hunger, they could borrow food to survive, often in exchange for serving as indentured labor.[26] The centrality of the landlord in the village meant that his dominion was not just economic but social. In Village in August, one villager proclaims that, "All of us, young and old, eat the Master's food, wear his clothes, and depend on him to live,"[27] the master in questing being their landlord. The poverty and indebtedness of the peasantry in rural Manchukuo did not just translate into a decreased

[25] Jun Xiao, *Village in August* (New York: Smith & Durrell, 1942), 177.
[26] Li, "Everyday Life in the Puppet State: A Study of Ordinary People's Experiences in Manchukuo," 168.
[27] Xiao, *Village in August*, 176.

standard of living, but increased dependence on wealthy landlords for basic subsistence. Indeed, the statement that they "wear [the Master's] clothes" was scarcely an exaggeration. As one villager stated in a personal interview: "There [were] 18 people in my family, and we all [slept] on the same bed. There was no sleepwear, not even shirts so we all had to sleep naked. I had only one pair of shoes that my mother made for me. Whenever I went outside, I would always take them off and carry the shoes in my hands in fear of wearing them out because I would have to wear them for at least two or three years."[28] Given the desperate levels of poverty demonstrated, it is no surprise that wealthy landlords who were able to supply the daily necessities of the villagers held a dominating political, social, and economic position.

Factories, cash crops, and trade alone do not signify the breakdown of feudal class relations. From the very beginning, Japanese rule in rural Manchuria was dependent on their alliance with the feudal landlord class against communist insurgents. Despite efforts to reform the feudal rural conditions, Japanese rule in many places only entrenched the rule of landlords and drove the peasantry further into poverty. Indeed, the exigencies of wartime policy and the brutality of Japanese rule likely only increased resentment among the peasantry. However, the landlords, the only class which the Japanese could depend on to ensure stability, could not be reliably trusted to implement policies and reforms which contradicted their class interests. While it is nonetheless the case that, Manchukuo developed a large military-industrial complex which would later go on to become the primary industrial base of the People's Republic of China, in the final analysis its rural policy relied on feudal class rule and extractive policies.

[28] Li, "Everyday Life in the Puppet State: A Study of Ordinary People's Experiences in Manchukuo," 172.

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