National Integration of the Peasantry: 
the Case of Japan

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The national integration of the peasantry may be defined as a process in which the peasants, while more or less preserving their subsistence economy, their traditional way of life and the limited relations with the outside world which these imply, and who thus constitute a relatively isolated microcosm of rural society, are involved in and subordinated to the dynamics of a broader social system formulated as a nation state. It is necessary to distinguish economic, political, social, and cultural aspects of the integration process, and to examine the interrelations among these aspects. This process implies, naturally, the transformation of the peasants themselves, since they are now exposed economically, politically, socially, and culturally, to various influences from the broader system in which they are being involved. The differentiation of the peasant into those who are able to adapt themselves to new circumstances and those who are not able to do so is inevitably promoted by these influences.

Throughout the process of national integration of the peasantry, we must distinguish two opposing factors: the integrating forces or the integrators, and the subject of the integration, i.e. peasantry. The main integrator is the nation state, or to specify more concretely, the government of a nation state striving for national integration under its hegemony. The mechanism of the capitalist economy is one of the most powerful integrating forces not only in the economic aspect of the process, but also in the others. Nonetheless, in so far as this mechanism is affected by governmental policies and is integrated as a subsystem into a more comprehensive social system formulated as a nation state, we should assume the nation state as the main integrator. 1

1 In my scheme, the political forces striving for mobilization of the peasantry in order to oppose the governmental policies of the time and to seize the
In so far as a nation state implies class antagonism within it, the policies of the government for national integration are led by particular interests of the ruling class or group. The ruling elite and their government monopolize the symbol of the nation, and impose the policies and institutions for national integration on the peasantry.

The peasants are the fundamentally passive factor in the process of national integration, because of their intrinsic character. Nonetheless, the peasantry have to respond to the imposed integration policy in some manner, since national integration means for the peasants the destruction of their way of life maintained for a long time. Whatever way they respond to the integration policy is one of the decisive factors in the integration process. The attitude of the peasantry towards the national integration policy may be classified roughly as (1) evasion, (2) resistance, (3) passive adaptation, (4) positive adaptation. These types of attitude are not exclusive to each other. It is likely that the attitudes of the peasantry differ in each of the above mentioned aspects of the integration process. For instance, the peasants may stubbornly resist the cultural integration, while they try to adapt themselves to the new economic circumstances. Moreover, we have to take into consideration that the growing economic and social differentiation of the peasantry may result in different responses according to their differing status, and this may in turn accelerate the differentiation. The type of the response of the peasantry to the integration policy depends not only on the historically determined social character of the peasantry in a country, but also depends on the character of the integration policy, including the form of its execution by the government, and its degree of fitness to the real social situation in the country. And if the applied policy does not fit reality, the government, in turn, has to respond to the response of the peasantry. Whether this response appears as suppressive or concessive depends once again on the character of the government and on the ability of the peasantry to adapt or to resist.

In this way, the state and the peasantry are two main variables in the process of the national integration of the peasantry. The peculiar course of the national integration of the peasantry in each country is determined by the characters of these two variables and by their interaction.
In Japan, the process of national integration of the peasantry took place intensely, in all of the above mentioned aspects, during a short period of approximately forty years, from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 until the beginning of the twentieth century, though the conditions for this rapid accomplishment had been provided in a socio-economic development during the preceding period, i.e. the Tokugawa period. This rapid advance in the national integration of the peasantry after the Meiji Restoration is closely related to the fact that among the Asian countries of the time, Japan alone was able to proceed towards industrialization and new military power in the imperialist world.

The national integration process of the peasantry in Japan represents an exceptional case, because of its rapidity and thoroughness. Japan was fortunate to have exceptionally favorable conditions for national integration, as will be discussed below, when she was confronted with a task of national integration in the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the case of Japan may serve as a model of an extreme form of the national integration of the peasantry, and thus as a point of reference in studying the process of the national integration of peasantry in the other countries.

In this paper I will briefly examine first, how thoroughly national integration of the peasantry was carried out in Japan in the early stage of her development as a nation state, and second, the factors which enabled Japan to accomplish such rapid and through national integration of the peasantry.

I. The process of national integration of the peasantry

1) At the starting point of the conscious endeavor towards national integration in Japan, there was a serious sense of national crisis among some members of various social groups. This sense, which played a decisive role in determining the course and the outcome of the political turmoil in the final stage of the Tokugawa period, had been brought about by the pressure from the Western powers and by Japan's self-cognizance of her, technological and military backwardness. Therefore, the most urgent task for the new leaders of the Meiji government which emerged as victor if this political upheaval, was to defend the political and economic independence of Japan against expanding Western powers. In order to achieve this, many radical reforms were necessary. Driven by the sense of national crisis, they could not hesitate in carrying out radical reforms, though many of them originated from the lower strata of the Samurai class.
The leaders of the Meiji government recognized clearly that not only the concentration of all power in the hands of the government, but also the establishment of a well-organized administrative system, reaching down to the village level, were reforming measures necessary to overcome their backwardness. After the Restoration, i.e. the transfer of state power from the Tukogawa shogunate to the new government under the authority of Tenno, the new government began to strive for the establishment of a highly centralized local administrative system, and were able to achieve this by the end of 1880’s, immediately before the promulgation of the Imperial Constitution in 1890.

Two hundred sixty-one Hans (feudal domains) which had constituted practically independent political bodies under the Tokugawa regime were replaced by forty-six prefectures forming local administrative districts of the centralized system of government. The governor of each prefecture was nominated by the government from amongst its bureaucrats, and the administration of the prefectures was put under the complete control of the government.

The Mura (village) was reorganized as the smallest unit of administrative organization, entrusted with many administrative functions and strictly superintended in their precise execution by the government and the prefecture. In an effort to improve administration efficiency at the local level, the government enforced the merger of several Muras into enlarged new ones. The mergers were conducted so thoroughly all over the country that the number of Muras was reduced from 74,479 in 1883 to 15,820 in 1889. This fact illustrates how positively the government exercised its power in order to establish its administrative organization at village level.

At the same time the government was striving to construct a national infrastructure, such as railway, postal and telegraph systems, and this infrastructure played a significant role not only in general economic growth and in the involvement of the peasantry into the market economy, but also in establishing the physical basis of the centralized administrative organizations.

In this way, even the peasants in mountain villages and on small islands were brought under the control of the highly centralized administrative organization. The village offices were the fundamental footholds for the government in executing various measures which aimed at the national integration of the peasantry.

2) Giving high priority to education, the Meiji government introduced the compulsory education system in 1872. The rate of attend-
ance was no more than thirty percent of the total number of children of school age at the beginning of the system, but exceeded ninety percent by 1906, a level as high as that of the most advanced European countries of the day. Such a rapid popularization of primary education owed a great deal to the established local administrative organization.

The compulsory primary education system served as a powerful weapon in implanting a common national consciousness in the people, because primary education in pre-war Japan was characterized by powerful government control and thoroughgoing indoctrination in Tenno worship and other authorized morals formulated in the Imperial Rescript on Education in 1890. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, school children all over the country were taught with identical texts compiled by the Ministry of Education, by qualified teachers indoctrinated in official ideology in the Normal schools established by the prefectures.

At the same time, the spread of education among the peasantry assisted their adaptation to the market economy and enhanced their social mobility.

3) The conscription system, introduced in 1873, also functioned as a powerful weapon for national integration.\(^2\)

The Conscription Act of 1873 contained, however, many exemption clauses, including redemption, because the needs of the standing army were not at that point so large for it to be necessary to conscript a large proportion of the eligible youth. Thus, the principle of universal obligatory militar service remained nominal for a time. Nonetheless, by 1889 in order to correspond to rapidly expanding military needs, the exemption clauses were abolished completely and obligatory military service was imposed universally. During the two wars against China and Russia, 1894-95 and 1904-05 respectively, most of the enlisted men were conscripts. Given the militaristic social climate of modern Japan, particularly as intensified by these wars, the fulfilment of one’s obligatory military service was considered as a kind of rite of passage before becoming an adult.

The military served as an institution for reinforcing a common national consciousness, Tenno worship and other morals indoctrinated in the schools. Especially for soldiers from the countryside, the military offered an opportunity for close contact with those who came from

towns and cities, with different occupations and different experiences, and thus served as a factor in enhancing social mobility.

It encouraged and sponsored the organizations of veterans which were eventually united in the Imperial Veterans' Association in 1910. The village branch of the Association, embracing most adult men, was an important social organization in the village and served to propagate and reinforce militaristic ideas at the village level.

4) Concerning the peasant economy, the most important institutional reform was the land tax reform carried out from 1873 to 1880. This reform aimed at completely revising the land tax system, inherited from the previous regime, because the actual rate of land tax had varied from one Han to another, and because the payment of taxes in kind was incompatible with a modern fiscal system.

The reform consisted of transforming the ambiguous usufruct rights of the peasantry under the feudal regime into exclusive private property, and commuting the land tax in kind formerly paid to the Han into a land tax in cash paid to the new central government at a uniform rate based on the evaluated worth of each parcel.

The land tax reform was a long and complicated effort, because in order to accomplish it every parcel in the country had to be measured, evaluated, and a document which certified landownership and settled the amount of tax to be paid by the owner had to be issued for each one. Because of the extreme subdivision of land into very small parcels, the number of documents issued exceeded 110 million. In addition, this work encountered the vigorous resistance of peasants seeking a lower tax on their land. The fact that this huge and complicated job was accomplished within seven years may serve as an indication of the degree of capability of the administrative organization.

The land tax reform was concerned only with settling the amount of tax for each parcel and identifying the owner who was responsible for payment of the tax, and did not touch upon tenancy relations. These had expanded gradually since the end of the seventeenth century, promoted mainly by rising productivity in agriculture and the intrusion of a money economy into the traditional peasant economy. The land tax reform had the effect of expanding tenancy even more rapidly than before. In the first place, the commutation of the land tax from pay-

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3 Confronted by many peasant uprisings opposing the land tax reform, the government was forced to reduce the projected tax rate of 30% to 2.5% in 1877.
ment in kind to cash payments brought new economic difficulties for the peasants, particularly those in economically less developed areas, since it exposed them to fluctuations in the price of rice and to exploitation by merchants. Secondly, with the establishment of private landownership, the land fulfilled the necessary and sufficient conditions to be treated as a commodity, since the complete removal of feudal restriction of the transactions and mortgage of land encouraged the entry of commercial and usury capital into land transactions.

A sharp turn in the economic situation took place in 1881, converting the galloping inflation of the 1870's into serious deflation by a drastic reduction in the amount of inconvertible paper money in circulation. This economic depression profoundly affected the peasant economy which was being drawn into the market economy. Thus, many peasants fell into debt and eventually were wholly or partially deprived of their land by official auction resulting from their neglect to pay the land tax, or by foreclosure.

5) The decades immediately following the 1860's were a painful transitional period for the peasant economy, because its involvement in the market economy was rapidly accelerated during this time by several successive factors.

The first factor was the expanding foreign trade which did fatal damage to some of the important commercial crops such as cotton, sugar cane, and indigo, while on the other hand, opening up a vast overseas market for raw silk and tea. The second was the effects of the land tax reform referred to above. The third was the construction of modern transportation facilities, particularly the railway, and the fourth was the start of industrialization.

The government had to make various efforts to assist the peasantry in their difficult task of adapting to a market economy, because the failure of the peasant to adapt might cause political and social unrest in the countryside, and also might create obstacles to economic development.

The most significant of the government's efforts was the promotion of the agricultural association (Nokai) as an organization for the improvement of farming methods. Beginning at the end of the 1880's the government tried to mobilize the village leaders who were striving spontaneously for the propagation of advanced farming methods, and to encourage them to organize the villagers into agricultural associations. Under the powerful sponsorship of the government and the prefectures, the organization of the associations spread so rapidly that by 1910 one
had been organized in every village, and this grew into a huge pyramidal organization with prefectural federations and the Imperial Agricultural Association at its top. Being subsidized by the government and the prefectures, this organization played the role of organizer for the agricultural cooperatives which began to develop after 1910 also under powerful sponsorship from the government. Although biased towards the interests of the landowners and the upper layer of owner-cultivators, this organization began to function as a pressure group for agricultural interests, as it expanded to constitute a huge national organization. In this way, the organization contributed to the national integration of the peasantry not only economically, but also politically.

The strategy of the government to give high priority to the establishment of an institutional infrastructure, such as the agricultural associations, and to utilize it as a channel for propagating advanced farming methods among the peasant masses, turned out to be successful.

Estimation of the growth rate of Japanese agriculture in its early stage caused a prolonged debate. However, according to the latest and most reliable estimation, the annual real growth rates of agricultural production were 1.8% and 2.0% for 1880-1900 and 1900-1920 respectively. This considerably high growth rate of agricultural production indicates the increasing productivity on small family farms, since Japanese agriculture lacked completely big capitalist farms. Moreover, production of commercial agricultural products such as cocoons, tea, fruit, and vegetables increased at a rate higher than the average, while many rural, small-scale industries such as silk reeling, silk and cotton

4 Besides the agricultural association, the government strove for the establishment of institutions for agricultural education and technological extension service.


7 Some sorts of fruit and vegetables, for instance apples and cabbages were introduced after the Meiji Restoration.
weaving, and manufacturing of many miscellaneous goods, a certain part of which was exported, were developing steadily, offering a supplementary source of cash income for peasant families. On the other hand, migration of poor peasants and their family members as wage laborers or domestic servants was increasing, as the other pole of the differentiation of the peasantry. They provided an inexhaustible source of cheap labor for developing modern industries. Nonetheless, the development of commercial agriculture and rural indigenous industries indicate that a certain part of the peasantry proceeded along the painful road of adaptation to the rapidly developing capitalist economy.

This adaptation of the peasantry had its historical premise. Commercial agriculture had already begun to develop spontaneously from within the peasantry since the second half of the Tokugawa period. Nonetheless, we cannot deny the effects of the government policy which gave high priority to the establishment of the institutional infrastructure.

However, the success of peasants' adaptation meant that the peasantry were put institutionally under the control of the government and were made to depend constantly upon its tutelage.

II. The favorable conditions for national integration of the peasantry

What kind of factors enabled Japan to achieve such a rapid and thorough national integration of the peasantry?

1) The most decisive factors in the process of national integration is the role of the nation state as integrator. The rapid achievement of national integration may be impossible to attain without correctly oriented, systematic efforts on the part of a state apparatus which recognize properly both the importance and the difficulties of its task.

Nevertheless, there are a certain number of prerequisites in achieving the national integration of the peasantry, for instance the development to some degree of the means of transportation and communication, an increase in agricultural productivity to an extent which provides the peasant economy with a certain amount of marketable surplus and so on. If these prerequisites are not present in sufficient numbers even the

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8 Cotton-spinning, which had been an important rural industry in the Tokugawa period, was 'gradually ousted' first by imported cotton yarn and later by the domestic cotton yarn manufactured in big factories. However, cotton weaving did continue mainly as a small rural industry.
most enthusiastic efforts of the state may fail, encountering too many obstacles, or cause serious social tension between the state, as the integrator, and the peasantry as the subject of integration.

In the case of Japan, there is no doubt that the new Meiji government played its role as integrator powerfully and skillfully. It recognized clearly the strategic importance of achieving national integration at the critical moment of its involvement in the world arena and pursued this goal consistently. It was able to choose appropriate policies for national integration, and to develop a comprehensive and systematic program for it. Furthermore, it was able to set up a centralized administrative organization which extended down to the remotest and smallest villages, and also was able to secure, by means of this organization, the strict execution of its policies to such an extent that it has been charged with too rigid centralism, conformism, and authoritarianism until today.

However, such a good performance by the government in its role as integrator would have been impossible if the prerequisites for national integration had not been prepared before the conscious efforts towards integration began. The marked ability of the government and its administrative organization was itself the result of processes taking place during the preceding period, i.e. the Tokugawa period.

2) The socio-economic developments of the Tokugawa period cannot be here discussed in detail, and only brief remarks will be made regarding some significant points closely related to the topic.

a) The social regime of the Tokugawa period was composed of some two hundred and sixty feudal domains (Han), and the Tokugawa shogunate, as the largest feudal lord, exerted institutionally strict, though not perfect, control over them. This system can be characterized as centralized feudalism. Corresponding to this political structure, nationwide network of commerce, finance, transportation, and communication were developing.

b) While remaining the basic political unit, the feudal domains were undergoing a high degree of regional integration. At the beginning of the Tokugawa period the Samurai, who had been direct rulers of the

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peasants, were forced to leave their fiefs and to live around the castle of their patrol-lord. Thus a castle-town, with a considerable population composed of Samurai and their servants, merchants, and artisans, was formed in each Han. The formation of these regional urban centers stimulated the commercialization of agriculture, the development of various rural industries, and both the permanent and temporary urban migration by members of peasant families. The fact that population density in the Japanese countryside had already reached a considerably high level, sustained by the intensive cultivation of rice, facilitated close economic and social intercourse between the castle-town as regional centers and the surrounding villages.

On the other hand, the foundation of effective administrative organization was needed in order to secure the control of the peasantry by the castle-town where the feudal ruling class was living. Thus the Samurai, the former warriors, were transformed into the bureaucrats of the Han administration, while some representatives of the village communities were institutionalized as agents of the Han administration and made responsible for the execution of various instructions from above. In this way, Samurai administrators and village officials were accumulating the administrative experience and knowledge without which the rapid establishment of centralized administrative organization after the Meiji Restoration would have been more difficult.

In short, regional integration on the scale of the Hans, which were small neither in area nor population, occurred as an important step towards integration on a broader, national scale.

c) The two hundred and sixty years of the Tokugawa period had been relatively peaceful. Until the last stages of the period, which began with the arrival of Admiral Perry's fleet in 1853, there had been neither alien threat nor civil war. The political stability of this period contributed favorably not only to economic development, but also to the accumulation of intellectual ability among the people.

The development of educational and cultural facilities in the castle-town was not irrelevant to the peasantry. Although the spread of education to the peasant masses was not to be achieved until after the Meiji Restoration, Japanese villages in the last stage of the Tokugawa period had already provided themselves with some well-educated leaders from the upper strata of villagers. They were to play an important role as mediators between the state as integrator and the peasant mass as the subject of integration.

d) One of the factors contributing to the political stability of the
Tokugawa period was the seclusion policy adopted shortly after the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate. While on the one hand the seclusion retarded the development of Japanese society in various aspects, by its retreat into isolation from the world, on the other hand it enabled Japan to pursue spontaneous development without being disturbed by alien influence.

Japan is an archipelago located at the eastern most extremity of the Eurasian continent. Separated from the continent by sea, Japan was able to avoid military invasion from the great empires on the continent, yet she was able at the same time to absorb the high civilization of the continent if she wished. Thus Japan was able to develop as a uni-racial country, and did not suffer from deep cultural or religious divisions among her people. This racial, cultural, and religious homogeneity was maintained and intensified by the seclusion, and served as a very favorable condition for political and economic integration when the need to shape that integration emerged as an urgent task.

3) A significant factor which enabled the government to pursue its policies for the national integration of the peasantry successfully was that the government was able to find a group receptive to its policies inside the village. Most of those who played the role of the intermediate receivers of governmental policies oriented to the peasantry, of mediators between the government and the peasant mass, belonged to the stratum of wealthy peasants known as Gono, which means literally “big peasant.” The term Gono was employed to signify those peasants who held more land, of which a part was being rented out, while the remainder was still being cultivated by their families, sometimes supplemented by a few hired workers. As such, the Gono was an intermediate and transitional stratum between the ordinary owner-cultivators and the large landowners renting out their land wholly or in a large part.

The Gono represented one pole in the differentiation of the peasantry under the penetration of the market economy. They were being differentiated from the ordinary peasants not only economically, but also intellectually. As Thomas C. Smith pointed out, the Gono in the last century of the Tokugawa period “read widely, and took a lively and intelligent interest in affairs far removed from events in the village. Such men occupied an intellectual world very different from that of the ordinary peasant.” 11 The fact that Japanese rural society had come to

11 Smith, op.cit. p. 178.
differentiate such a social group, which was able to respond sensitively to various stimuli from the outside world prior to the beginning of the political and economic turbulence that led eventually to the Meiji Restoration, has a decisive meaning for the process of national integration on the peasantry.

The Gono's growing positivity and their endeavors to adapt themselves to the changing outside world were stimulated intensely by the overall social changes after the Meiji Restoration. Their intellectual interest was expanding rapidly, and their active energy was being emitted in various directions. Utilizing their interest in and ability to understand affairs far removed from the village, the government was able in general to secure their sympathy and faith in its political program for national integration. Nonetheless, some of them participated actively in the "Liberty and People's Rights Movement", the first popular political movement in Japan, which demanded a Constitution and Diet as protection against authoritarian government, and had been inspired by the newly introduced Western political ideas of liberty and democracy.

However, the most common activity of the Gono in the early Meija period was economic. They labored, for example, to introduce new varieties of rice, new commercial crops such as tea, advanced farming methods such as ploughing by horse and drainage of paddy fields; to promote sericulture and the silk reeling industry; to improve indigenous industries; to promote saving, and so on. The remarkable feature of their economic activity was that it aimed to promote the adaptation of the village community as a whole to the changing economic circumstance rather than constituting a personal endeavor for wealth, and thus their activity can be considered to have been characterized by community-oriented leadership.

The reason why this type of leadership emerged should be sought in the social character of the Gono. Although among the Gono there were many who "occupied an intellectual world very different from that of the ordinary peasant," the Gono as cultivating landowners were different from the commercial and usury capitalists who acquired land but related to the village from outside, and still preserved close ties with the village community in which they were living. They were still the acknowledged leaders of the village community and did not separate themselves from it. Although the accelerating differentiation of the peasantry was gradually bringing about an explicit opposition of the poor to the rich, and the tenant to the landowner, a fierce and pervasive sense of solidarity was still the most important characteristic of the
Japanese village and had not yet broken down. Thus, when the changing economic and social circumstances made it necessary for the village community to adapt, the Gono, as the acknowledged leader of the village community and with a sense of solidarity towards it, undertook the role of organizer and promoter in modernizing the village toward the adaptation. Without these community-oriented activities of the Gono, the rapid propagation of the agricultural associations, for instance, would have been difficult. Yet in effect the most active Gono had already begun a spontaneous movement to organize meetings and associations for studying advanced farming methods before the government began its effort to promote the agricultural associations. The effort of the government to mobilize its administrative organization for an overall propagation of the agricultural associations proved effective precisely because the goal of improved farming methods was widely held among the Gono. In addition, the thorough indoctrination of the peasantry with the official ideology became more feasible via the indoctrination of the village leaders as the primary receivers of this ideology, charged with the subsequent indoctrination of their followers. The successful national integration of the peasantry thus became possible when the government, pursuing consistently that goal via a well-organized administrative system, was able to find active and influential community leaders and succeeded in integrating them as effective mediators between the government and the peasant mass in pursuit of its program of national integration.

4) Nevertheless, the Gono was by nature a transitional social stratum. Involved more and more closely and firmly with the social mechanism of rapidly developing capitalism, the Gono themselves were differentiating; some of them because parasite landowners or rural bourgeoisie, while others sank to being small owner-cultivators or even tenants. Through this differentiation, the community-oriented leadership of Gono was retreating, while tenants, affected by the rising trade union movement and other social changes, began to awaken to class consciousness and to organize themselves in tenant-unions which articulated their economic demands for lower rent and their social and political demands for human rights, universal suffrage, etc. The political mobilization by the tenants against the established order of the village, and the government which backed this order, began immediately after the First World War, and signified the beginning of a new phase in Japanese rural society.