

Land System and Rural Society in Late Imperial South China: Comparison with Japan and Europe

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A Japanese village in the Edo era had its own fixed territory that feudal lords demarcated by drawing boundary lines. A manor in feudal Europe also had its own fixed territory. As for a village of the Edo era, the part of arable land in the territory was divided into many parcels of cultivated fields, and the prerogative of holding, managing and cultivating them was normally restricted to the peasants of the village.

In contrast to Japan and Europe, however, it is widely held by Sinologists (especially by Japanese scholars) that in traditional China (namely late imperial and Republican China) a village did not have its fixed territory. For instance, when a parcel of arable land in a neighboring village went on sale, not only the peasants from the village but also those from other villages were eligible to buy it. In other words, the owners of arable land in a neighboring village were not always the ones belonging to that village. Similarly, the cultivators, who leased arable land from landowners, were also not always the ones belonging to that village. That is why scholars have argued that a village in traditional China did not have its own fixed territory.

Nonetheless, the present writer has discovered evidence to the contrary based on his own research of historical sources and field study on a village in the Pearl River delta. This village had its own fixed territory in the late imperial and Republican periods, and the land system in the area had a multilayered structure.

With regard to some villages surrounded by an embankment in those periods, the situation was as follows. The inside of the embankment consisted chiefly of land and creeks. The land was divided into many sections by innumerable creeks. And a section of land, equivalent to an “aza 字” in Edo era Japan, was divided by ridges into many parcels of a cultivated field, especially a rice field. A parcel was the basic unit for cultivating crops and was also the unit for land taxation, unlike a section. As mentioned above, the owners or cultivators of parcels of an adjacent cultivated field in a neighboring village were not always the ones belonging to that village. So it is clear that,

at the level of parcels of cultivated fields, there was no fixed territory of a village. This level was exactly the first layer in the multilayered structure mentioned above.

The inside of the embankment was also the place where ducks and geese were bred. A large piece of land and broad waters, in other words, a set of several sections of land and some creeks, were necessary to breed them. And creeks also provided net-fishing in winter.

But who did these sections of land and creeks belong to? A section and the creek next to it belonged to a fixed village permanently, while individual peasants were not allowed to possess any sections and creeks. Therefore, the rights of breeding and net-fishing and the income from them belonged to the village. And a set of over several ten sections of land and the attached creeks formed the fixed territory of a village. This means that a village did have a territory; however, this territory existed at the level of sections of land and their attendant creeks. This level formed precisely the second layer in the multilayered structure.

This land system of multilayered structure was a fundamental characteristic of the rural society in the Pearl River delta. It meant, among others, that a village had to control and manage its own territory. With regard to traditional China, Edo era Japan, and feudal Europe, the present writer aims to offer concrete evidence regarding commonalities and differences between these cases. In doing so, he hopes that this study can ultimately provide Sinologists and historians with a platform for the comparative study of rural societies and their land systems.