

Dividing the Land: Corporate Agricultural Landholding as an Expression of Japanese Conceptions of Parity and Equity

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Although historians, both Japanese and non-Japanese, widely conceive of the early modern and modern eras (*kinsei*, *gendai*, *genzai*) as marked by a very close identification between individual farm households and the land they tilled, landholding patterns until recently were often much more complex than this image suggests.¹ One of the more widespread alternative tenure systems was that which is commonly referred to as *warichi*, a phrase that can literally be translated as “dividing the land” and which I generally refer to in English as redistribution. Participants in *warichi* systems from time to time reallocated the fields that a household farmed. No family had a direct connection with any single plot of land included in a redistribution system. While it was widely studied by pre-war Japanese scholars, in the postwar era scholars have neglected study of *warichi*.² This scholarly neglect is somewhat puzzling because, in several of its manifestations *warichi* survived well into the twentieth century and in a few instances is practiced even today.³

In some versions, land was apportioned by villagers or domain authorities to each family equally⁴, in others, on the basis of the number of active adult males or women and children of a certain age⁵, and in still other instances, on a *pro rata* basis which consistently maintained the landed wealth, expressed as a constant proportion of the village’s land use rights, of each participating household.⁶ In this latter instance, the proportion of a village’s land use rights held by a given family was the same before and after a given redistribution. Because this was the case, land use rights were often not expressed in terms of putative yield (*kokudaka*), but rather in such terms as *ken*, *kenmae*, *myō*, etc., which had no direct connection with either land area or value, and which might be translated appropriately as “share”.

Even where *warichi* was not employed on paddy and dry field, similar mechanisms have

been employed widely to allocate riverbed land for vegetable gardening or grazing, to reallocate fields after field rationalization (post-war), to allocate fields by and among tenants of large landholders, and to allocate the land some cities rent for residents to use in gardening.⁷ Even in some areas where it had not been employed at all for more than half a century, or where its use had been very restricted, *warichi* was employed during World War II to assure many rural families of basic subsistence.⁸ Furthermore, similar allocative mechanisms were employed frequently in managing *iriaichi*, swidden (*yakihata*) or granting licenses to gather *matsutake*, for example.⁹ This resonance, in combination with the persistence and even re-implementation of *warichi* practices, suggests that a study of *warichi* has something to teach us about widespread Japanese conceptions of fair play within the context of agriculture.¹⁰

First appearing in the documentary records of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, *warichi* took a variety of forms. Indeed, many scholars, especially local historians, make very subtle distinctions between the various practices and insist that what I refer to as *warichi* is not a single system, but a variety of systems that must be treated distinctly. As is evident below, there certainly were significant differences in the operations of such systems. Nonetheless, all involved a non-market mechanism for redistributing access to the income streams from land, and I think that there are shared principles that underlie these practices that allow us to think of them together and somewhat more systematically than has often been the case. I think it is possible to see some patterned variations among them. As such, I think of these as sub-categories of redistributive practices rather than treating each instance as a separate entity.¹¹

Describing the myriad variations in *warichi* customs is not possible here; instead, I would first like to set out some common elements of these practices that strike me as fundamental, and then to make a preliminary attempt to associate some variations in redistribution purposes with variation in the scope of redistribution in a village. The following discussion is based on discussions with *warichi* participants in two sites in Niigata Prefecture [Nagaoka and Tôkamachi-shi], Kumayama-machi and several mountain communities in Okayama and Kochi Prefectures, as well as historical data from these and other regions throughout Japan.

I estimate that about a third of the land value (*kokudaka*) of early modern Japan was affected by *warichi*.¹² This estimate is necessarily imperfect, since it relies heavily on the *kokudaka* figures of domains that made *warichi* a part of their official policy at some point during the Tokugawa era. It largely ignores the many instances in which villagers, totally on their own, instituted *warichi*. These areas could be small and widely scattered, but there are also cases of village-based *warichi* such as the ten southernmost counties of Echigo, where the practice was very widespread despite its local roots.

Where *warichi* was developed strictly at the village level, all decisions regarding the timing of redistribution, the specific purposes which the redistributions were designed to achieve (timing and purpose were closely inter-linked), and the specific procedures involved in effecting the redistribution were made solely by those holding superior land use rights

within the village and who participated in village assemblies. As already noted, the widespread use of *warichi* in Echigo province is an example of *warichi* implemented at the village level, but all post-Meiji Restoration survivals of *warichi* must also be placed into this category. In the pre-Restoration period, a dispute over *warichi* might be adjudicated by domain or *tenryō* officials or their commoner representatives, but the basic thrust of their investigations was, as far as I have seen in my research, to determine as clearly as possible what past village practices were, how they compared with nearby practices of redistribution, and to negotiate a settlement based on that information.¹³ They did not make an effort to create and impose a set of rules extraneous to the community.

Another pattern of control was a mixture of village and domain initiatives. In most of these instances the system originated in villages, but at some point the domain stepped in to assure some standardization of procedure, to license those who measured the land, or to encourage more frequent implementation of *warichi* for their own purposes. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of procedural decisions remained in the hands of villagers. The domain of Kaga appears typical of this "mixed" form of control. Until the preparatory years of the domain's great mid-seventeenth-century reform, the Kaisakuhō, there was no extensive effort to get villagers to use *warichi*. Especially as the reforms were implemented, the domain encouraged re-evaluations of village agricultural output for tax purposes, and as part of that effort and a general effort to assure that land taxes were fully paid, reform leaders vigorously encouraged *warichi*. Somewhat later, the domain made it mandatory for the surveyors who measured land for redistribution be licensed by the domain, but only in the early nineteenth century did it go so far as to specify any of the procedures for implementing a redistribution.¹⁴

Under these two, most widespread, patterns of control, the values expressed in *warichi* procedures and objectives were broadly popular. That a number of villages continued to practice *warichi* on some or all of their farmland not only after the Meiji land tax reforms (*chisō kaisei*) of the 1870s, but also in some instances after the post-war land reform, strengthens this impression. As we might readily expect, holdovers from the Tokugawa era can be seen in areas of purely village-based *warichi*, but they are also apparent in instances of mixed domain and village control such as Kaga domain, where the last redistribution of which I am aware took place in 1888.¹⁵

In addition to locus of control, these systems can be categorized by the kinds and amounts of land subject to redistribution. Much regional variation existed in the kinds of land subject to reallocation under *warichi*. In some villages, virtually all farmland was subject to *warichi*.¹⁶ Such comprehensive redistribution systems in principle included residential land, but in practice made provision for excluding a certain amount of residential land from the redistribution. In other regions, some fairly substantial segments of arable were exempted, all paddy, for example. And in still other instances, a very limited amount of land was involved, and some of this might have been devoted to a specific purpose such as supporting a major annual Shinto festival. This was, for example, the case with an area of paddy in Seiriki ward of Kumayama-machi, Okayama Prefecture, that locals refer to as *miyaji*. Part of the "rent" on

this land was the obligation to provide food and drink as part of the autumn Otôya Festival of thanksgiving for the harvest.¹⁷

That Japanese should have some sense of parity or "fair shares" is not particularly surprising, but that it was expressed so directly in land tenure practices, especially on paddy land where an individual family's attachment to the land (*aichakushin*) is thought to be particularly strong, is unexpected.

Among the attitudes and values we find expressed in the various manifestations of these systems, I have tentatively identified the following:

1) Random assignment to fields is a consistent, but not universal, principle of design in allotment systems, a principle that limits the potential for manipulation of the process for personal gain. That one's field allocation was a matter of "fate" rather than human manipulation, made outcomes tolerably acceptable as fair. In a very few instances, a *fixed cluster of fields* was assigned to individual households by lottery rather than assigning each *individual field* by lottery (e.g., Tokamachi City, Niigata). Also, fixed rotation was occasionally employed, which each family farming a field in pre-determined succession.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the use of field assignment by lot overwhelmingly predominates.

2) In some programs, land *areas* were apparently divided inequitably for distribution; however, differences in *area* are considered by recent practitioners to be misleading grounds on which to base a judgment of inequity. Interviews suggest that villagers judged that some land, even within a small and restricted section of a village, produced a higher yield than other land, and the area of each plot was adjusted to compensate for this soil productivity difference so that each allotment produced a *comparable total yield*.

3) A willingness to tolerate marginal inequities that might appear in any particular distribution is closely correlated with an intermediate-term view that each participant had an equal chance to benefit from the same inequity at the next rotation a few years down the road. In the course of a redistribution, land area and productivity were not always carefully measured, but estimated by sight.¹⁹ In these instances, some participants doubted that full equity was achieved, but the results were none-the-less not contested. Certain that the pattern of field redistribution would be continued over a long time and all participants, through the lottery, had a chance of receiving those fields that might be considered marginally more advantageous, participants abstained from blocking the outcomes of a redistribution.

4) Where most village land was involved in redistribution, *proportionality* rather than equality in land distribution is likely to be the operating principle. This provided the desired communal benefits with minimal sacrifice of opportunity for personal gain.

5) Where proportionality was involved, equity in sharing the natural risks of farming (flooding, poor drainage, landslides, and so forth) appears to have been the priority, not provision of basic sustenance for each farm family. In these areas redistribution also served as a means of allocating the land tax burden among villagers under the early modern system of joint village responsibility for land tax payment (*rentai sekininsei*).²⁰

6) The principle of sharing losses from natural disasters (e.g., the need to recover

inundated land, and/or need to adjust to a permanent loss resulting from a shifting river) was sometimes extended to cover other hardships faced by the village as a whole, such as food shortages in the late war and post-war years. Examples of this have been discussed by respondents in both Kochi Prefecture and Kumayama Town, Okayama Prefecture. However, redistribution was *never* designed to cover the failings of individual cultivator families.

7) In instances of equal division (*kintô-wari*) examined to date, only a part of the village's land was involved, and private landholdings were not disturbed by reallocation (e.g., Kumayama-machi, Tokamachi-shi). Where *kintô-wari* was involved, the opportunity to expand one's holdings in the *warichi* area was restricted, but not the opportunity improve one's position in non-*wari*-chi land. This practice also limited the access of outsiders who bought land in the community. They were generally deprived the right to participate until they had lived in the village for a number of years.

8) Where *kintô-wari* was involved, the primary purposes underlying redistribution appear to have been two-fold. On the one hand, equal division provided an incentive for broad participation in farming techniques that could not be accomplished by small farm households alone and where monitoring of participant inputs was difficult. The burning of mountain land for swidden in Okayama provides a clear example. Controlling the burn was a major problem requiring the assistance of a number of people. It appears to have been easier to divide the land equally among participants than to try to monitor their respective labor inputs and reward them proportionally for their efforts. In other instances, the function of *warichi* land may well have been providing minimal primary supply of some basic agricultural good for all those recognized as full members of the village. In these instances, the land was providing a limited economic safety net for all farmers in a village or a designated portion of them (Kumayama-machi, Tôkamachi-shi, wartime Kochi).

9) In a relatively small number of cases, lands were distributed to families based on some measure of family size and composition. This was the case in the *kado-wari* system of Satsuma, in which lands were allocated based on the number of adult males in a family. In the case of Kudaka-jima, Okinawa, lands were allocated according to the number of children and women in the family. In these instances, the apparent motivation was providing basic sustenance in proportion to the number of family members who worked the land. It may also have assured a good supply of labor for other domain and community purposes in the case of Satsuma.²¹

As these principles suggest, absolute equity was usually less the outcome of a redistribution than implementing a sense of "fair share", even in several "equal distribution" types of *warichi* that I have encountered. The opportunity for gain from personal investment was usually still present under these systems.²² What these redistributive systems do express, however, is a careful balance of private and public good in the context of the particular challenges faced by agriculture in different communities.

Table I

Tentative Correlation of Redistribution Type and Extent of Land Subject to Redistribution

	equal redistribution by family	equal redistribution based on family composition ²³	proportional redistribution by family
redistributes purpose	some land investment sharing; minimal food supply	"all" land basic food supply; communal/ domain labor guaranteee	"all" land risk-sharing for natural disasters

NOTES

- 1 Fukushima Masao, *Chisô kaisei* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kôbunkan, 1968), pps. 51-54, briefly introduces a variety of landholding forms evident in mid-nineteenth century during the restructuring of land taxes. *Warichi* is among them, but other forms of complex ownership were also present.
- 2 On the pre-war study of *warichi*, see Furushima Toshio's valuable, "Warichi seido ni kansuru bunken," *Nôgyô keizai kenkyû*, 16:4 (1939), pps. 134-162. In the post-war period, only Aono Shunsui has conducted extensive research on *warichi*. See his *Nihon kinsei warichi sei shi no kenkyû* (Tokyo: Ozankaku Shuppan, 1982). In each area he studies, he also notes relatively recent post-war research.
- 3 Post-war survivals seem to have commonly died out in the late 1960s and 1970s. I have personally visited currently active *warichi* in Okayama and Niigata prefectures: Some of the observations below are based on interviews with participants in October, 1993 (Kumayama-machi, Okayama Prefecture) and January-February, and April, 1994 (Nagaoka and Tôkamachi cities, Niigata Prefecture). In a somewhat different context (municipal leasing of dry field patches to residents) of Suita, a similar mechanism functions (personal visit, September, 1993, with Fukui Katsuyoshi, Professor of Anthropology, Kyoto University).
- 4 E.g., post-war Kumayama-machi.
- 5 Satsuma domain's well-known *kado-wari* system represents an example of the former; the redistributive system seen on Kudaka-jima, Okinawa, through World War II represents an example of the latter.
- 6 This was probably the most common form. It was, for example, widely seen throughout the Niigata, Toyama, Ishikawa and Fukui prefectural areas in the Tokugawa and early Meiji eras.
- 7 Kumayama represents an instance of the first type; see Ishida Hiroshi, *Kumayama hashi to Kumayama eki* (Kumayama-machi, Okayama Prefecture: Kumayama Machi Yakuba, 1988), 10-11. On the use of *warichi* by tenants, see Philip C. Brown, "Feudal Remnants' and Tenant Power: The Case of Niigata, Japan, in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Peasant Studies* 15:1 (Fall, 1987), pp. 1-26.
- 8 Interview with Hirotani Kijurô, Kochi Prefectural Library, November, 1991.
- 9 For a brief English language overview of the evolution of common property in early modern Japan, see Margaret A. McKean, "Management of Traditional Common Lands (*Iriaichi*) in Japan," in Panel on Common Property Resource Management, Board on Science and Technology for International Development, Office of International Affairs, National Research Council, *Proceedings of the Conference on Common Property Resource Management* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1986) pp. 533-89.
- 10 I should note briefly that while *iriaichi* is commonly considered separately from agricultural land, based on discussion with *warichi* participants as well as historical data from throughout Japan, I increasingly feel that much *iriai* is, in fact, conscientiously cultivated and deserves to be considered as fully agricultural land. To the extent that one might have thought of distinguishing *iriai* from other farmlands because of the frequent presence of a high degree of corporate control, the widespread

existence of *warichi* on dry field and paddy indicates that such a distinction has been unmaintainable in broad areas of Japan over extended periods of time.

- 11 Most studies deal with *warichi* in one region only rather than trying to look for patterns in the various practices found throughout Japan. Aono's work represents a major exception, perhaps the only exception in the post-war era.
- 12 This estimate is based on calculations of the assessed value of domain-mandated *warichi* systems listed in Furushima's and Aono's works noted above. I believe that this is a conservative estimate, for I have come across other examples of *warichi* recently that were not reflected in this earlier literature.
- 13 See, for example, Takano jinja monjo B-12 "Ryôgai nagara kuchi agegaki o motte negai tatematsuri soro on koto" (Enkyo 2.8), B-13, "Hendôgaki no koto" (Enkyô 2.11.7), B-14, "Osorenagara kuchiage o motte negai tatematsuri sôrô on koto" (Enkyô 3.6), all in Nagaoka Shi Shi Hensan Shitsu (City Hall Annex), Nagaoka, Japan; Satô-ke monjo, 3701, "Ozawa mura Tomizaeimon deiri sho ikken" (from Hôsei 10), "An'ei 2 nen Ozawa mura deiri gansho narabi ni utsushi", Niigata-ken, Yoshikawa Chô Shi Hensan Shitsu; Ihara Shun'ei ke monjo (unnumbered) "An'ei 8 nen Chikabu ikken gansho tome chô", Oaza Tsurugi, Kashiwazaki-shi, Niigata-ken.
- 14 At that time (1838), it specified that a redistribution must take place at least once every twenty years. There is evidence that authorities had difficulty in enforcing even this minimal interventionist policy. Wakabayashi Kisaburo notes that this interval was first established by domain ordinance in 1800. See his *Kaga han nôsei shi no kenkyû* (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1970-72), *ge*, p. 147. This was not fully enforced during the ensuing decades, in part because of the development of less drastic measures that accomplished the same end (149-152). When these intermediate measures proved inadequate, the 1838 regulations were issued. Oda Kichinojo, *Kaga han nôsei shi kô* (Tokyo: Toe Shoin, 1929), p. 491, reprints the 1838 ordinance. See also "Denchiwari" in (*Kaitei zôhō*) *Kano kyôdo ii* (Heki Ken, ed., Kanazawa: Hokkoku Shuppansha, 1973, reprint of 1956 edition), p. 603. Tochinai Reiji (Tokyo: Mibu Shoin, 1936), pps. 117-120.

In still other areas of Japan, *warichi* was implemented from the top down by daimyo. Satsuma domain represents a well-known example. There is some question about just how effective the "top down" variety was in securing cooperation from villagers, and those instances where it was effective must be treated with care if we are to think about popular conceptions of "fair play" in land management. Fortunately, these instances represent a small minority of *warichi* cases.
- 15 Wakabayashi, Kisaburô, ed., *Kanemaru sonshi* (Kanazawa: Kanemaru Son Shi Kankô Inkai, 1959), p. 115, and Kawa Yoshio, *Imae mura to Imaemachi no rekishi* (Kanazawa, Komatsu-shi Imaemachi, 1969), pps. 382-3. For an example from Etchu province, see Fukuno Chô Shi Hensan Inkai, ed., *Fukuno chô shi* (Toyama: Fukuno Machi Yakuba, 1964), p. 264.
- 16 This appears to be widespread among the villages of the Hokuriku area, for example. For overviews, see Aono, and Niigata-ken Nôgyô Kyôiku Sentaa, *Niigata-ken Nishi Kanbara-gun ni okeru warichi seido no chôsa: Nôminteki tochi shoyû no rekishiteki tenkai* (Niigata: Niigata Kenritsu Kônôkan Kôtô Gakkô, 1968), Niigata Ken Naimubu, *Niigata ken ni okeru warichi seido* (Niigata: Niigata Ken Naimubu, 1929), Tochinai, *Kyû Kaga han denchiwari seido*.
- 17 Interview with Sugihara Yoshikata, September 28 and 29, 1993, Kumayama Town History Office.
- 18 This practice was followed in Seiriki commune of Kumayama-machi and the Omiya section of Nagaoka-shi according to Kanegaki Kensaku and Horii Sho'ei.
- 19 In my investigations to date, this was especially the case in lands that were associated with shifting forms of cultivation, but it has also been found in interviews with people who have cultivated long-standing dry field and paddy.
- 20 The existence of *warichi* has often been explained as the result of frequent flooding in villages forced to bear land taxation as a corporate responsibility. For a variety of reasons — including poor correlation between flooding and redistributive practices, the continuation of *warichi* long after the end of corporate tax paying responsibility, etc. — such an explanation is at best incomplete. My

current research is aimed at trying to develop a more satisfactory explanation for the presence of redistributive practices. For an overview of the research on the origins of redistribution practices, see Furushima Toshio, "Warichi seido ni kansuru bunken."

- 21 Ono Takeo, *Tochi keizai shi kôshô* (Tokyo: Ganshodo Shoten, 1931), p. 30. Richard Lieban's "Land and Labor on Kudaka Island" (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1956) is largely focussed on *warichi* on Kudaka-jima.
- 22 This is especially true when we consider in the agricultural activities of farmers their full context.
- 23 I have examined only one instance of this sort to date, that of Satsuma domain. This redistribution system, called *kadowari*, was domain-imposed, and according to Professor Matsushita Shirô, at best erratically implemented (personal conversation, Fukuoka, November, 1991). Kudaka-jima land represents the one other version I have discovered to date.