

The Debate on Democratic Revolution in Japan in the 1920s

GUO Qi, DU Fenggang, JIN Huilan

Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China

Anti-hegemonic movements in Japan had occurred frequently since the early 20th century, and democratic revolution debate in the 1920s was the first significant domestic debate on future development strategy. Various discussions on it from Japanese academia involved state power, absolutism, agrarian revolution, and revolutionary strategy, etc. An analysis of early Japanese scholars' perspectives on the democratic revolution helps to know about the social milieu in Japan at that time, and is of positive significance to comprehend the development process of the current Japanese democratic revolution.

Keywords: democratic revolution, debate, democratic revolution debate, Japan

Introduction

Japanese democratic revolution debate was mainly about the pre-war “revolutionary strategy” of Japan between Japanese Communist Party and the Labor-Farmer Party, a left-wing social organization in Japan. It was the first and one of the most important debates on democratic revolution in Japan, as well as a prelude to debate on Japanese capitalism¹. The core issue of the debate determined the main object of subsequent debates, and also laid foundation for Japanese capitalist controversy, which had a profound impact on the democratic revolution in Japan after the war and even today. The debate took place roughly from 1927 to 1932, and it was not emerged accidentally, but determined by specific historical conditions and social foundation of the time, which reflected the interests of various classes at that time and was demonstrated by some thinkers. At that time, there were mainly two subjects, one was Japanese Communist Party, the other was the Labor-Farmer Party, and both of them took periodicals as main fronts in the debate. Japanese democratic revolution debate was divided into four stages. The first stage was from April 1927 to February 1928, initial debate through the publication of papers; The second stage: from March 1928 to April 1929, debate on the “July Programme”²; The third stage: from May

Funding: This article support by Youth Fund for Humanities and Social Sciences Research of the Ministry of Education “Research on the Translation, Sharing, and Evolution of Marxist Terminology in the Early Translation of the Communist Manifesto between China and Japan” (《共产党宣言》在中日两国早期译介过程中马克思主义术语的译出、共享与演变研究 20YJC740035).

GUO Qi, doctoral student, School of Marxism, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

DU Fenggang, Ph.D., professor, School of Foreign Languages, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

JIN Huilan, Ph.D., professor, School of Marxism, Dalian University of Technology, Dalian, China.

¹ The debate on Japanese capitalism is divided into pre-war and post-war. The main body of the debate is the lecture school and the labor-farmer school. The debate mainly revolves around the nature of Japanese society and the choice of revolutionary strategy. The Japanese Communist Party proposed that the landlord system is the material foundation of the Mikado system, emphasizing the necessity of bourgeois democratic revolution.

² July Programme, that is, Programme of 1927. On July 15th, at the permanent committee meeting of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, “On Japanese Programme” (Programme of 1927) was adopted, which is also known as July Programme.

1929 to December 1930, debate about nature and type of the revolution; The fourth stage: from January 1931 to October 1932, transformation and re-transformation of the revolutionary strategy were discussed, and the five-year democratic revolution debate was ended with the “Situation in Japan and the Task Program of Japanese Communist Party” (“Programme of 1932”) (Institute of Social Economics and Economics, 1947a, pp. 1-5). The debate was mainly reflected in strategic choice. Japanese Communist Party advocated “Two-stage Revolution Theory”, which means that the bourgeois democratic revolution should be carried out currently and then transformed into proletarian revolution, while the Labor-Farmer Party proposed “One-off Revolution Theory” that compressed the two into one stage, advocating the development of the proletarian revolution.

Main Content of the Debate

The focus of the debate between Japanese Communist Party and the Labor-Farmer Party was mainly on several issues such as state power, absolutism, agrarian revolution, and revolutionary strategy, with absolutism and agrarian revolution being the basic issues, on which basis the composition of state power was analyzed, and then the revolutionary strategy was set through the structure of state power. The focus of the debate is discussed and analyzed one by one as follows.

First, Debate About Absolutism

In 1922, Japanese Communist Party drew up a draft Programme and defined the social nature of Japan: “Capitalism in Japan still bears the traces of feudal relations, and most of the land is in the hands of semi feudal big landlords, the largest of which is the head of the Japanese government, the Mikado.” (Institute of Social Economics and Economics 1947b, pp. 1-5). Therefore, the Programme proposed the slogan of abolishing the Mikado system, but before “Draft Programme of 1922” being discussed and adopted, Japanese Communist Party was dissolved under government repression. After that, although Japanese scholars discussed the issue of the Mikado system for many times, no final conclusion had been reached, which could only be temporarily shelved. Discussion on the absolute Mikado system has always occupied a pivotal position, and it is also one of the important topics discussed by Marxist scholars today. In 1926, Japanese Communist Party continued the idea of the “Draft Programme of 1922” and issued an article analyzing the political situation and the revolutionary stage at that time. On this basis, it advocated that the current goal of the struggle was to combat absolutism, emphasizing the importance of eliminating the remnants of feudalism. However, the Labor-Farmer Party believed that with the development of capitalism, landlords had become no different from capitalists, and they had

gradually integrated into the ideology of the bourgeoisie and entered the ranks of financial capitalism. There was no longer necessary to place absolutism as the main goal of the struggle while the topple of imperialism being the new one. Fierce debate begun around the above issues between the two. (Tsumata Tsunami, 1930)

Subsequently, the Communist International adopted “On Japanese Programme” (“Programme of 1927”), which analyzed the structure of Japanese state power and the role of absolutism at that time. Japanese Communist Party once again emphasized many feudal elements in the national structure, and proposed the slogan of abolishing absolutist monarchy. However, the Labor-Farmer Party still contended that absolutism had lost its material foundation and was just a figment with no practical foundation in traditional sense, which did not require a dedicated democratic revolution. In response, Japanese Communist Party criticized the Labor-Farmer Party for only erasing the old feudal system of the Japanese country in its own mind, while the feudal system did not disappear. As the Japanese War of Aggression against China begun, the feudal absolutist forces of Japan were

completely exposed. The Japanese Communist Party reassessed the Mikado system, believing that it not only represented the interests of the bourgeoisie and the landlord class, but also contained the nature of absolutism, which was precisely the particularity of the Mikado system of Japan, and the recognition of it was the key to the smooth progress of the Japanese democratic revolution.

Second, Debate About Agrarian Revolution

The feudal elements of absolutism in rural areas are mainly reflected in the two aspects of land and landlords. The “Draft Programme of 1922” proposed that “state power is held in the hands of big landlords and some industrial and commercial bourgeoisie alliances, and most of the land is held in the hands of semi feudal big landlords.” (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan, 1962, p. 3). With the further development of capitalism, “Programme of 1927” proposed that in the process of the integration of the big landlords and the bourgeoisie, the landlord class was in a very important and independent position in the composition of state power, and feudal relationship in rural areas was a concentrated reflection of the landlord forces in politics. “Programme of 1932” analyzed the landlord class as an independent factor, emphasizing that the big landlords hindered the development of rural productivity in Japan. Since agricultural revolution was one of the basic tasks of the Japanese revolution, the neglect of the importance of it by the labor and peasant faction was the root cause of the debate on the democratic revolution. Japanese Communist Party carried out the guiding ideology and believed that only agricultural revolution could enable Japan’s agriculture completely shake off feudal shackles and achieve free and comprehensive development of rural productive forces. However, the Labor-Farmer Party held a different view, arguing that feudal land system had been abolished after Meiji Restoration, and that what remained was only small-scale agricultural production mode. In response, Japanese Communist Party retorted that the Meiji Restoration had completed the issue of land ownership in a bourgeois manner, and that the exploitation relation in rural areas had not been bourgeoisized, but merely transferred from feudal lords to landlords. The rent paid by landlords to the government had been converted into cash payments, while the tenant farmers still paid in kind to the landlords. Therefore, feudal relationships still continued. Japanese Communist Party strongly criticized the Labor-Farmer Party for erasing the semi feudal production relations in agriculture and ignoring the importance of agrarian revolution.

Third, Debate About State Power

Three programmes of Japanese Communist Party, namely, Draft Programme of 1922, Programme of 1927, and Programme of 1932, served as the basis and outcome of the debate on democratic revolution, reflecting the objective situation of Japanese society and the nature of Japanese revolution at that time. The debate on democratic revolution was that Japanese Communist Party and the Labor-Farmer Party interpret the program and discuss the differences from their own positions. In 1922, Japanese Communist Party was established, and subsequently it issued the first draft programme, “Draft Program of 1922”, which pointed out that at that time, Japan’s state power was held in the hands of large landlords and some industrial and commercial bourgeois alliances. The Japanese Communist Party immediately issued a document and expressed support for the programme, believing that state power is in the hands of capitalists and landlords, and that the content of state power was basically consistent with the draft programme. However, the Labor-Farmer Party saw it differently, believing that the current Japanese regime had been completely controlled by the imperialist bourgeoisie as the landlord class became capitalized. In 1927, the Communist International adopted a new guideline, the “On

Japanese Programme” (“Programme of 1927”). While criticizing the mistakes of Yamakawa³ and Fukushima⁴ principles, the Programme clarified that state power was held in the hands of hegemonic capitalists and landlord class allies. After the publication of the Programme, the Japanese Communist Party and the Labor-Farmer Party invariably adopted it to explain the correctness of their theory. Therefore, some compromises were made between the two, and the labor and peasant faction also agreed to the provisions on state power. The two parties appeared to a convergence, but in essence, their ideas and strategies remained different. One party regarded the completion of bourgeois democratic revolution as its current main goal, while the other party still aimed at achieving the task of building socialism and regarded bourgeois democratic revolution as only a part of it. “Programme of 1932” positioned the Mikado system as an independent element and emphasized that Japanese state power was held in the hands of the Mikado system, the landlords, and the monopoly bourgeoisie, ultimately ending the debate on democratic revolution.

Fourth, Debate About Revolutionary Strategy

The debates over state power, absolutism, and agrarian revolution discussed above were ultimately manifested in the choice of revolutionary strategies. There were great differences between Japanese Communist Party and the Labor-Farmer Party on the two issues of the composition of state power and feudal forces, so the two parties also had different designs for revolutionary strategies. As mentioned earlier, Japanese Communist Party advocated a two-stage revolution into two stages, with a bourgeois democratic revolution first, and followed by a proletarian revolution when the time was ripe. From their own standpoint, the Labor-Farmer Party put forward One-off Revolution Theory, arguing that the task of the Japanese bourgeois revolution was only a secondary task derived from the socialist task of the proletarian revolution (Tsumata Tsunami, 1930, p. 103). The end of the bourgeoisie democratic revolution is the beginning of the proletarian revolution. As the two being compressed into one stage, the bourgeoisie democratic revolution falls into a secondary subordinate position that needs to be resolved and realized by itself in the process of the ongoing proletarian revolution. After analyzing the theory of the labor and peasant faction, Japanese Communist Party refuted that it was a left-wing theory imitating the social democratic revolution in Europe and the United States, and applying the precedent strategic formula of the Russian revolution. Therefore, the revolutionary strategy based on the theory did not conform to Japanese reality, which violated the revolutionary content stipulated in the Programmes, and eliminated the necessity of the democratic revolutionary stage as an independent historical stage.

Core Content of the Debate

After the 416 Incident⁵, the organization of Japanese Communist Party suffered a heavy blow, and almost completely forced to operate underground, while the Labor-Farmer Party was preserved as a legitimate proletarian party. As the political situation changed, the form and content of debate had also undergone some

³ Yamakawa Doctrine, the earliest manifestation of Japanese Marxism, played a significant positive role in guiding the left-wing movement, mainly including “theory of direction change” and “theory of the single proletarian class Party”. Because it was proposed by the leader Yamakawa, it is called “Yamakawa Doctrine”.

⁴ Fukumoto Doctrine, proposed by Kazuo Fukumoto to solve many problems of “Yamakawa Doctrine”, mainly includes “separation and combination theory” and “theoretical struggle theory”. In 1926, the guiding position of Fukumoto Doctrine was established, and since then, Japanese Marxism entered the era of “Fukumoto Doctrine”.

⁵ The 416 Incident: On April 16, 1929, the reactionary government conducted a major raid of the leading members of Japanese Communist Party, arresting more than 1,000 suspects. The Japanese Communist Party organization almost collapsed. After the 416 Incident, Japanese Communist Party organization completely turned into underground activities.

changes. After 1929, the front representing the political theory of Japanese Communist Party evolved into the proletarian scientific research institute, and continued to engage in debates with the legitimate proletarian party, the labor and peasant faction, based on magazines and publications. The first two stages of the debate on democratic revolution discussed the constitution of the state power and the way of “revolutionary strategy”, while the third stage began an in-depth discussion of the nature of the debate. The core of the debate was whether material basis of the entity class of feudal absolutism still existed in current Japanese society.

The Labor-Farmer Party insisted that the land policy of Meiji Restoration had abolished the feudal land system and lost the possibility of developing into a semi feudal big landlord. Moreover, they believed that a large number of rural landlords in Japan at that time showed tendency of bourgeoisie, and the landlords were disconnected from the land. Therefore, there was no material basis for entity class of the feudal absolutism, let alone the need to remove it. Although landlords were in an antagonistic relation with tenant farmers, the direct producers, they extracted the surplus value of the tenant farmers with production, and had become the bourgeoisie in essence. Therefore, as an important political force, the landlord’s activities were essentially conducted under the guidance of the bourgeoisie. As for the current situation of an opposite relation of agricultural production between landlords and tenant farmers, the Labor-Farmer Party believed that it was only small agricultural production, and all production relations on this basis were modern and legalized private land ownership. Rent in kind was a manifestation of the mode of small agricultural production under the legalized private land ownership. It can be seen that the Labor-Farmer Party intentionally obliterated the material foundation of the absolutist forces.

In response, Japanese Communist Party published “About Relationship between Japanese Land Owners” and criticized the view of the Labor-Farmer Party, emphasizing that the class foundation of feudal absolutism still existed, and believing that the Labor-Farmer Party negated the vestiges of deep-rooted semi feudal relationships in Japan’s political economy. Based on a comprehensive analysis of characteristics of rural land and land policies in Japan’s political economy, Japanese Communist Party argued that Meiji Restoration merely abolished the purely feudal land ownership relationship, that is, the purely feudal land relations of three hundred vassals that began with the Shogunate were abolished and replaced with the unified land possession under an absolute autocratic monarch. Japanese Communist Party believed that despite the rapid development of capitalism in Japan, there was still a residual material basis in the foundation of the semi-feudal state form under absolute autocratic rule in agriculture. There had been no significant development of capitalism in Japanese agriculture, with most farmers being small producers and the most direct producers. The essence of feudal agricultural production relations in Japan had not changed substantially, but was still a reproduction of exploitation of tenant farmers. Japanese Communist Party emphasized that although paying land rent in cash and reducing or exempting land rent had alleviated the burden on tenant farmers, the highest landowner was also the sovereign. For small-scale farmers directly affiliated to the state, land tax was not the only land rent. Indirect taxes such as consumption taxes and customs duties, as well as local taxes such as household taxes and housing taxes, were still very heavy, despite the reduction and exemption in land taxes, and all rental taxes were essentially land rents. Moreover, there was also a military service system characterized by labor land rent. All of these were slave-consciousness education of blind obedience that absolutism infused into proletarians, and also manifestations of the semi feudal land system.

The semi-feudal absolutist forces of Japan were once again exposed during “918” incident. The Comintern combed the history and characteristics of Japanese imperialism, criticized the mistakes of “traitors of communism”, and published the “Programme of Japanese Communist Party under the Japanese Situation”

(“Programme of 1932”). The Communist International refuted the previous neglect of the role of absolutism and proposed that Japan’s current power structure included three parts, namely, the Mikado system, the landlord system, and monopoly capitalism. As mentioned earlier, the feudal landlords it represented and the highly concentrated financial capital could no longer be completely separated. Moreover, the Japanese Mikado system also had its own particularity of containing the characteristics of absolutism, and the semi feudal absolutism Mikado system was the key to all problems. Therefore, the new Programme abandoned “theory of alliance regime of capitalists and landlords” in Programme of 1927, and instead analyzed the Mikado system as a separate power element. The new Programme stated that

the Mikado system is the pillar of domestic reactionary politics and old feudal system, and the Mikado state apparatus is the stubborn pillar of the existing dictatorship/of the exploiting class, while the primary task of the Japanese revolution is to smash it. (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan, 1967, p. 11)

It pointed out that the revolutionary nature of Japan at that time was a bourgeois democratic revolution with a tendency to forcibly transform into a socialist revolution.

Conclusion

The debate on democratic revolution in Japan in the 1920s was one of the earliest and most important debates in the construction and development of Japanese democracy, objectively reflecting the changes and processes of the political and economic development of Japanese capitalism. The debate deeply analyzed the state power, absolutism, and agrarian revolution in Japanese society at that time. And on this basis, it deeply analyzed whether there was a material class foundation for feudal absolutism in Japan at that time, and then formulated the next revolutionary strategy. The debate process promoted the development of democratization in Japan, as well as the process of democratic revolution. The debate on capitalism after the Second World War inherited the main differences in the debate on the democratic revolution. The lecture school and the Labor-Farmer school launched another large-scale debate on issue of absolute Mikado system and land, which is still one of the important topics of concern for Japanese scholars today.

References

- Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan. (1962). *Collection of programmes of the Communist Party of Japan*. Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan.
- Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan. (1967). *Collected programs of the Communist Party of Japan*. Central Committee of the Communist Party of Japan Press.
- Institute of Social Economics and Economics. (1947a). *Debate on the democratic revolution*. Ogaki: Ito Bookstore.
- Institute of Social Economics and Economics. (1947b). *Democratic revolution debate*. Ogaki: Ito Bookstore.
- Tsumata Tsunami, N. (1930a). *The strategy of the Japanese Proletariat*. Wen Yunxun Wire Service.