

Social Movement in Japan: An Introductory Overview

I will give an introductory overview of Japanese social movement and a brief explanation of its main characteristics. I will make no sociological analysis about them here.

Japanese social movements are classified into three arenas mutually related to each other.

The first arena is related to the social movement caused by globalization. First is the anti-nuclear movement that demands the abolition of the nuclear power plant all over Japan. Due to the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred on March 11th, 2011, not only many people were killed and injured, it also occurred an accident in Fukushima, that the core of the nuclear power plant was dissolved and that the radioactive substance was released outside of it. Many people were forced to leave their hometowns for fear of radioactivity. This situation became a trigger of the movement that questions the responsibility of the accident for the power company and the government, and that demands the compensation for the victims of accident. The movement has merged into the whole anti-nuclear movement in Japan. Today, it has become one of the most influential social movements in Japan.

On the other hand, the anti-pollution movement and the environmental movement in Japan are not so influential, although Japanese people have much interest in the environment issue. Japan has a history of the anti-pollution movement represented by the Minamata pollution lawsuit movement. It was one of the most influential movements especially in the high economic growth period of 1970s. However, the environmental movement is uninfluential now.

Second is the anti-poverty movement. Globalization has resulted in the worsening of the labor conditions of the working people especially due to the contractualization of employment in Japan. However, there has not occurred the large labor union movement. I will explain why so a little bit later. The poverty of the single mother, children and elderly have become the serious social issues. Their distressed living conditions have not been easily improved, because the social welfare is not sufficient. However, there is no any influential movement by them. On the other hand, a movement has occurred to demand the relief of poor people. This anti-poverty movement has been performed by people assisting the homeless people living around the lodging house district, Kamagasaki in Osaka, San'ya, in Tokyo and so on. They have been in unity with a variety of poor people in cooperation with the anti-poverty movement of France and South Korea. However, this movement has been small so far, therefore, it has

not been so influential for the poor people in Japan.

Third is the movement that supports the foreign people working in Japan; Chinese, Brazilian, Peruvian, Filipino and so on. The movement has demanded the improvement of the working conditions and the increase in wages. The foreign workers from the Asian and South American countries have increased in Japan especially after 2000s. However, the foreigners have been limited to engage in the unskilled manual jobs by the immigration law. At present, most foreigners have worked as the technical trainees that are legally permitted. Therefore, there have occurred many troubles over the working conditions and wages due to the discrepancy of the immigration law and the actual working conditions. Thus, there have occurred many Japanese movements to support the foreigners facing the troubles.

The Japanese unionists have organized the labor unions for the foreign workers on a local city base. Therefore, the movement has been performed not nationwide but in the range of the city. Moreover, there are few labor unions organized by the foreign workers themselves, because the employers have managed them strictly in the workplaces. As a result, there have increased the foreign workers that escape from the original workplaces and work illegally in another workplaces.

The second arena is related to the anti-war social movement. Today, the anti-war and peace movement is so influential in Japan. It is linked with two social issues originated in the Asian-Pacific War. First is the issue on the Japanese militarization. In the post-war, Japan has abandoned the military force for war with any foreign country by the constitution, so-called the Peace Constitution. However, recently, the government enacted the so-called War Law to legalize the military involvement in the international conflicts by expanding the interpretation of the constitutional provisions. It became a trigger to give rise the movement of anti-War Law by the young people and citizens. However, it has not yet been able to smash the intention of the government.

Second is the movements of the war victims. War victims are the *hibakusha*, that is, the atomic bomb survivors, in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the victims from the Asian countries that were ruled by the Japanese army during the Asia Pacific War; people who were forcibly taken to work in Japan and the former comfort women who were abducted by the prostitution traders and soldiers. The *hibakushas* have performed the movement to demand the compensation for damage caused by the atomic bombing. The responsibility should be imputed to the Japanese government that

abandoned the compensation of the *hibakusha* in the negotiation with the United States.

The Asian war victims have performed the movement to denounce the Japanese government for its war crime. In particular, the Japanese movement supporting the former comfort women has become a politically high-profile movement linked with the movement of South Korean former comfort women. They have demanded that the Japanese government should take responsibility of the sexual slavery during the War and to apologize to them formally as the government.

The third arena is related to the movement of the minority group. There are some ethnic and historical or national minorities in Japan. First is the movement of Okinawan people are an ethnic and historical minority, whose population is counted 1.4 million in 2016. The Okinawan movement have demanded the removal of the US military bases from Okinawa. After the War, the United States governed Okinawan islands and brought many bases there. Those bases continued to be in Okinawa after the administrative authority was returned to Japan in 1972. Okinawan people have performed the movement to demand the removal of these bases from Okinawa after the war up to today. The main target of the movement has been the Japanese government accepting the US bases in Okinawa by the US-Japan Security Treaty.

Second is the *burakumins'* liberation movement. '*Buraku*' means the 'community' and '*min*' means the 'people'. *Burakumin* are the minority people, whose population is estimated around three million, living in around 3,000 communities all over Japan. Many non-*Buraku* people believe that *Burakumin* are the descendants of people being in the caste-like position in the feudal Japan. They are still discriminated against in work, residence, human relationship and in particular marriage. *Burakumin* are not the ethnic people but the Japanese at any point. They have struggled against the discrimination by organizing the movement that pursues the liberation from any discrimination from 1920s. Their movement has been influential politically and socially, and thus has become the main shaft of all the minority movements in Japan.

Third is the movement of Korean people living in Japan, whose population is counted around 520,000 in 2016. They are the people from the former Japanese colony. They were forced to move to Japan during the War and have continued to live in Japan until today. They have been deprived of the various human rights legally and socially. Therefore, they have struggled for the acquisition of the human rights. Particularly in late years, there has occurred an anti-Korean

movement that defames Korean people with hate speech or the abusive words. Many Japanese and Korean people have performed the counter-movement against the hate speech movement. And they finally won the Antidiscrimination Law in 2016.

Fourth, there are the indigenous people called *Ainu* whose population is estimated around 20,000 mainly in Hokkaido. *Ainu* means the 'person.' They lived throughout the eastern part of Japan not only in Hokkaido and in the mainland of Japan before 19th century. However, they were dispersed to the various parts of Japan due to the assimilation policy of Japanese government after Meiji era started in 1876. The *Ainu's* ethnic culture was almost lost in the history of the assimilation. It has left only a part of ethnic culture today. A few *Ainu* people have performed the movement to revive the ethnic culture and regain their ancestral lands. However, it has remained a small movement, because the majority of *Ainu* people already have lost the ethnic identity due to the assimilation and lived as the Japanese.

Finally, there are other important social movements in Japan. One of them is the movement of the disabled people. The disability movement has been influential socially with the support of the nondisabled people. They won a law that prohibits the discrimination against the disabled people in 2015.

Yet, another is the women's liberation movement. The women's liberation movement was on the rise in the political era of 1960s-1970s. However, it does not have the large influence today. Instead, in recent years, the movement of the sexual minorities is rising. It remains still in the small-scale movement in Japan. Japan is a patriarchal society in which Japanese people have the strong gender role consciousness. This has prevented the development of the liberation movements both of the women and the sexual minority.

These are the major social movements in Japan. The social problems are conditioned by the historical and social background of the society. And the social movements are conditioned by the social problems. Originally, we have to analyze the commonality and the differences between the Japanese movement and foreign ones. However, here is not the place to compare them except some points.

Let us look at the commonality between Japanese movement and the foreign one. As I mentioned earlier, there are the social movements in Japan caused by globalization and the social movements of *general* distressed and minority people as in the foreign countries; the anti-poverty movement, the disability movement, the foreign workers' movement, the women's liberation movement and so on. On the other hand, there are some unique social movements in Japan. All

of them have a long history and a great impact on the Japanese society. I will give a brief explanation of the historical and social conditions that have characterized these movement.

First is the social movements that have the historical background. There have occurred many social issues caused by the Asian-Pacific War. Therefore, there have been a variety of war victim in Japan; the *hibakusha*, the Okinawan people whose land was occupied by the US bases, Chinese people who were forcibly brought to Japan, the former Korean comfort women and so on.

Any movement to address these issues has become a major trend of the movement in Japan. In addition, the social issues brought by the war are linked with the issue of the Japanese nationalism. Japanese government has addressed these issues by ignoring the war responsibility and fueling the nationalism among Japanese people.

The ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party, enacted the War Law in 2016. The next step is to build the State that is able to make war with the foreign armies by revising the Peace Constitution and upgrading the Emperor's position from the non-political state symbol to the political head of the State just like one in the pre-war. Thus, these have become a trigger of the influential movement of anti-war and peace.

People often performed the protest rallies surrounding the Houses of Parliament in Tokyo in 2016. At the same time, the movements of the war victims and anti-US base in Okinawa have been deployed as the anti-war and peace movement. Okinawan people have performed the continuous rallies to demand the withdrawal of new plans of base construction in Okinawa. People who support the former comfort women hold rallies to oppose any agreement between Japanese government and the Korean one, in which they —will build a foundation for delivering money to the former comfort women without any direct apology.

Next, it is about the difference between Japanese movement and foreign ones especially in terms of the cultural and social backgrounds. Japanese society is a free and democratic one that is open to the world, which is integrated based on the achievement principle on the one hand. On the other hand, it is a society that is closed within it just like a pseudo-family-like society that is integrated based on the ascription principle. Any group such as company, administration, neighborhood association, school, family and kinship group and even hobby club tend to contain the pseudo-family-like structure, while it has the democratic rules on the surface.

Anthropologist Chie Nakane called the Japanese society a *tate shakai*, the 'vertically ordered society'. In such dual structure, the

insider tends to be included unconditionally to the group, and the outsider tends to be mercilessly eliminated from the group. Its most noticeable case is the *buraku* discrimination. *Burakumin* are discriminated against due to the popular belief that they came from the caste-like position in the feudal Japan. While Japanese society is one claiming the respect for human rights and the equality of opportunity, *burakumin* sometimes are discriminated against in daily human relationship, particularly in marriage. Therefore, *burakumin* have performed the strong anti-discrimination movement.

The closed nature of the Japanese society is supported by the false ideology of one ethnicity, and therefore that all Japanese make one family. Such ideology has produced the parochial nationalism. The right-wing believe that the former war was the right battle in order to protect the independence of Japan. There has been such ideology behind the attitude toward the war of Japanese government that has rejected apology to the war victims in the Asian countries, and ignored its responsibility toward them. The xenophobic movements of the right-wing that ostracize Koreans in the rallies is a product of such ideology. The movement of the anti-war and peace has to struggle with the ideology of such parochial nationalism.

The belief of the ethnic homogeneity and the family-based principle sometimes makes it difficult to criticize the in-group member and in-group itself. On the contrary, it makes easy to criticize the out-group member and out-group itself. For example, in the Japanese company, the employer and the employee tend to be in a pseudo-parent-child relationship. Therefore, the labor movement is unlikely to occur beyond the limit of the individual company.

This is also seen in more or less the situation of any other group. Moreover, the closed nature of the society sometimes penetrates even in the social movement organization. Then, the formal democratic principle does not function.

For example, the boss or the leader sometimes dominates the organization. The member that has a different opinion is expelled from the organization, as long as he or she does not withdraw the opinion. The organization itself sometimes collapses due to the conflict of factions. All of these become obstacles to the development of social movements. To break the closed nature of such organization is the decisive key condition for the social movement to achieve its purpose in Japan.

This is a brief overview of the Japanese social movement. I will explain the detail of each social movement referred to in this commentary if I have any opportunity.

