

EXCERPTS FROM THE REFORM EDICT OF TAIKA

Introduction

In the decades after the death of Prince Shōtoku, and in spite of the vision articulated in his constitution of 604, clan rivalries continued to characterize Japanese political life. Finally, in 645, a coup d'état brought to power a new group of leaders with a renewed commitment to the remaking of Japan's government on a Chinese model. In a series of edicts, the court sought to centralize political power, create state institutions mirroring China's imperial bureaucracy, and establish national landholding and taxation systems. Many historians have considered the Taika Reforms the genesis of the Japanese imperial state. "Taika" was the reign and era name assumed by the Emperor Kōtoku in 645; in keeping with the reformist spirit of the day, Taika means "great transformation."

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from The Reform Edict of Taika

As soon as the New Year's ceremonies were over, the Emperor promulgated the following edict of reforms:

I) Let the following be abolished: the titles held by imperial princes to serfs granted by imperial decrees (*koshiro*); the title to lands held directly by the imperial court (*miyake*); and private titles to lands and workers held by ministers and functionaries (*omi*, *muraji* and *tomo no miyatsuko*) of the court, by local nobles (*kuni no miyatsuko*), and by village chiefs (*mura no obito*). In lieu thereof, sustenance households¹ shall be granted to those of the rank of Daibu (chief of a bureau or of a ward) and upwards on a scale corresponding to their positions. ...

It is said that the duty of the Daibu is to govern the people. If they discharge their task diligently, the people will have trust in them. Therefore it is for the benefit of the people that the revenue of the Daibu shall be increased.

¹ The term "sustenance households" is a loose translation of the Japanese term *hehito* or *fuko*. It refers to a certain number of households, which were assigned to the officials in place of the serfs taken from them. Generally taxes remitted by these households became personal income of the officials. The rights to these sustenance households were hereditary.

II) For the first time, the capital shall be placed under an administrative system. In the metropolitan (or capital) region, governors (*kuni no tsukasa*) and prefects (*kōi no tsukasa*) shall be appointed. Barriers and outposts shall be erected, and guards and post horses for transportation and communication purposes shall be provided. Furthermore bell-tokens shall be made and mountains and rivers shall be regulated.²

One alderman (*osa*) shall be appointed for each ward (*bō* or *machi*) in the capital, and one chief alderman (*unakashi*) for four wards. The latter shall be responsible for maintaining the household registers and investigating criminal matters. The chief alderman shall be chosen from those men belonging to the wards, of unblemished character, strong and upright, who can discharge the duties of the time effectively. In principle, aldermen of rural villages (*ri*) or of city wards, shall be selected from ordinary subjects belonging to the villages of city wards, who are sincere, incorrupt and of strong disposition. ...

Districts are classified as greater, middle and lesser districts, with districts of forty villages constituting greater districts; of from four to thirty villages constituting middle districts; and of three or fewer villages constituting lesser districts. The prefects for these districts shall be chosen from local nobles (*kuni no miyatsuko*), of unblemished character, strong and upright, who can discharge the duties of the time effectively. They shall be appointed as prefects (*tairei*) and vice prefects (*shōrei*). Men of ability and intelligence, who are skilled in writing and arithmetic shall be appointed to assist them in the tasks of governance and book-keeping. ...

III) It is hereby decreed that household registers, tax registers, and rules for allocation and redistribution of land shall be established.³

Each fifty households shall be constituted into a village (*ri*), and in each village there shall be appointed an alderman. He shall be responsible for the maintenance of the household registers, the assigning of sowing of crops and cultivation of mulberry trees, prevention of offenses, and requisitioning of taxes and forced labor. ...

Questions:

1. How do you think you would have responded to these reforms if you were a regional clan leader in Japan in 646? Would you have been favor of them or not?
2. What new authority would these reforms give the emperor?
3. What Chinese elements can you see in these reforms?
4. Do you think it was easy for the Japanese imperial court to implement these reforms? Why or why not?

² Bell-tokens entitled their bearers to use post-horses, which were kept for official use only. By the regulation of mountains and rivers is meant the posting of guards at ferries and mountain passes, thus delimiting the boundaries between provinces.

³ The *denryō* (land regulations) says: "In distributing land, two tan shall be given to a man as his allotment land, and two-thirds of that amount to a woman. ..."

Longer Selection

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⁴ Same as footnote 1, above.

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vice prefects (*shōrei*). Men of ability and intelligence, who are skilled in writing and arithmetic shall be appointed to assist them in the tasks of governance and book-keeping. ...

III) It is hereby decreed that household registers, tax registers, and rules for allocation and redistribution of land shall be established.⁶

Each fifty households shall be constituted into a village (*ri*), and in each village there shall be appointed an alderman. He shall be responsible for the maintenance of the household registers, the assigning of sowing of crops and cultivation of mulberry trees, prevention of offenses, and requisitioning of taxes and forced labor. ...

All rice fields shall be measured by a unit called a tan, which is thirty paces in length by twelve paces in breadth.⁷ Ten tan make one *chō*. For each tan, the tax (*so* or *denso*) shall be two sheaves and two bundles of rice; for each *chō*, the tax shall be twenty-two sheaves of rice.

IV) Old taxes and forced labor shall be replaced by a system of commuted taxes based on [the size of] the rice fields (*denchō*). These taxes shall consist of fine silk, coarse silk, raw silk, and floss silk, which are to be collected in accordance with what is produced in the locality. For each *chō* of rice field, the rate shall be one rod (i.e., 10 feet) of fine silk. For four *chō* of rice field, the rate shall be one piece of fine silk, which is forty feet in length by two and a half feet in width. If coarse silk is substituted, the rate shall be two rods per *chō*, and one piece of the same length and width as the fine silk for every two *chō*....

A separate household tax (*kochō*) shall also be levied, under which each household shall pay one rod and two feet of cloth, and a surtax consisting of salt and offerings. The latter may vary in accordance with what is produced in the locality. With regard to horses for public service, one horse of medium quality shall be contributed by every one hundred households, or one horse of superior quality by every two hundred households. If the horses have to be purchased, each household shall contribute one rod and two feet of cloth toward the purchase price. With regard to weapons, each person shall contribute a sword, armor, bow and arrows, a flag, and a drum.

Under the old system, one servant was supplied by every thirty households. This system shall be altered to allow every fifty households to furnish one servant to work for various officials. These fifty households shall be responsible for providing rations for one servant, by each household contributing two rods and two feet of cloth and five *masu*⁸ of rice in lieu of service (*yō orchikara shiro*).

Waiting women in the palace shall be selected from among good-looking sisters or daughters of officials of the rank of vice prefect or above. Every one hundred households shall

⁶ Same as footnote 3, above.

⁷ One tan as existed then represented 0.294 acre.

⁸ Or *shō*. One *shō* equals 1.638 quarts.

be responsible for providing rations for one waiting woman. The cloth and rice supplied in lieu of service (*yō*) shall, in every respect, follow the same rule as for servants.