

## **THE POLICY MANAGEMENT OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF AGRARIAN SOCIETY TOWARDS AN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY IN TAIWAN**

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### **Abstract**

This article discusses Taiwan's transformation from a developing country to a developed industrial nation through land reform. The article aims to explore the Government's policy management in transforming Taiwanese society from an agrarian to an industrial society through land reform policies. The article uses a qualitative research method with a literature study for analysis. The research results indicate that Taiwan's land reform in the mid-20th century successfully redistributed land to peasants and small farmers, with positive implications for reducing social inequality and increasing agricultural productivity. This foundation became the social basis for the industrialization of Taiwanese society. In addition, the role of the Taiwanese Government in implementing land reforms, designing industrial policies, developing infrastructure, and supporting the agricultural sector through technology has been a key factor in the country's industrialization success. In conclusion, Taiwan's achievement of developed-country status is the result of successful land reform policies that supported the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. This success also highlights the importance of a strong state, autonomous bureaucracy, and appropriate economic management policies.

**Keywords:** Land Reform, Peasant, Agrarian Transformation, Industrialization, Developmental State

### **Introduction**

Taiwan is one of the countries that has successfully transformed from an underdeveloped to a developed economy. In 2023, Taiwan was classified as a developed economy (IMF, 2023) and ranked among the top 20 economies in terms of macroeconomic stability and international competitiveness (Donner, Hartmann, Härterich, & Steinkamp, 2022). The International Institute for Management Development (IMD) ranked Taiwan 10th among 69 countries in 2025, up from 6th in 2021. In terms of domestic economic performance, IMD ranked Taiwan 4th (IMD, 2025). On the social side, the quality of human development is considered good, and

social inequality is low. The United Nations Development Program classifies Taiwan as a country with a very high Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.926. In terms of social inequality, Taiwan's GINI coefficient was only 33.9 in 2023, lower than that of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which reached 35.7 (World Population Review, 2025). In other words, the social inequality situation in Taiwan is better than in the People's Republic of China.

Some academics note that factors influencing Taiwan's industrialization include government strategic planning, agricultural accumulation, technological development, and the strengthening of small and medium-sized enterprises (Liu, 1969; Kim & Wang, 2024; Hsiao, 2024). In the field of agriculture, one policy considered to have laid a solid foundation for Taiwan's development is land reform, which distributed land to peasants and small farmers (Kay, 2002). The land redistribution carried out by the Taiwanese government is among the most successful in the world (Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022). According to Cristobal Kay (2002), land redistribution in Taiwan has created a more equitable social structure, which will have positive impacts on Taiwan's industrialization.

This article discusses government management in implementing the process of transforming Taiwanese society from an agrarian to an industrial society through land reform policies. Land reform will be a focus of this article because it is one of the economic cornerstones of Taiwan's economic progress, transforming it from a developing to a developed country. Moreover, the success of land reform in Taiwan also reflects the positive implications of effective public policy management.

## Theoretical Framework

The topic of land reform has been discussed in previous studies. There are three major topics related to land reform, especially in Taiwan. First, discussions related to the geopolitical context of land reform in East Asia, particularly in Taiwan and Japan. Second, obstacles to implementing land reform and their impact on a country's slow development. Third, the influence of land reform on the success of industrialization in a country.

### 1. The Geopolitics of the Land Reform in East Asia

The discussion of the geopolitical context of land reform appears in an article titled "A Taste of Communists' Own Medicine: The Political Consequences of Land Reforms in Japan and Taiwan." In this article, Chiang, Fan, and Hsu (2025) discuss land reform in Japan and Taiwan within a geopolitical context. Historically, communist countries implemented land reforms to create an egalitarian rural society by abolishing the landlord class and strengthening collective agricultural production among peasants. However, in the context of East Asia, land reforms were also implemented by non-communist states aligned with the Western Bloc to reduce social inequality, with the aim of curbing the influence of the communist movement in their countries. This study explores the geopolitical, socio-economic, and political

effects on the political behavior of their societies and on domestic political power in both countries. The article concludes that, in economic terms, land reforms in both countries have improved society's welfare, especially in rural areas. From a geopolitical perspective, this policy has successfully curbed the expansion of communist ideology into both countries. From a domestic political standpoint, the increase in welfare resulting from land redistribution had weakened leftist groups (Socialists/Communists) in both countries because the public trusts non-leftist parties, believing they have successfully improved welfare (Chiang, Fan, & Hsu, 2025).

## **2. Land Inequality and the Obstruction of Development**

The discussion of land inequality, which hinders development, is covered in five (5) articles. In the article titled "Agrarian Conflict and Land Ownership Inequality: A Juridical Study on the State's Responsibility in Guaranteeing Citizens' Constitutional Rights to Land," / " *Konflik Agraria dan Ketimpangan Penggunaan Lahan: Kajian Yuridis terhadap Tanggung Jawab Negara dalam Menjamin Hak Konstitusional Warga Negara atas Tanah* ", Melysa, Murtikusuma, Setiawan, Hidayat, & Maulidi (2025) discuss the role of the state in guaranteeing citizens' constitutional rights to land. The state should be able to resolve agrarian conflicts and land ownership inequalities. This is emphasized by Earlene & Djaja (2023) in their article titled "Implications of Agrarian Reform Policies on Land Ownership Inequality through the Lens of Human Rights" / " *Implikasi Kebijakan Reforma Agraria terhadap Ketiaksetaraan Kepemilikan Tanah Melalui Lensa Hak Asasi Manusia* ". Using a normative legal framework, this article examines the relationship between agrarian reform and land ownership inequality from a human rights perspective. This article argues that the purpose of land reform reform is to restructure the ownership, use, and utilization of land to create a more just society, thus land ownership disparities have the potential to violate Human Rights because the right to land is part of the right to work, a decent standard of living, and other rights inherent to humans (Earlene & Djaja, 2023).

However, Melysa, Murtikusuma, Setiawan, Hidayat, and Maulidi (2025) argue that many developing countries' governments that fail to transform into developed countries also fail to ensure land rights for people, especially small farmers and indigenous communities. Various factors cause this failure. In the article "What Lies Behind the Unsuccessful Agrarian Reform in Indonesia" written by Cahyana in 2014, it is argued that the factors causing the failure of land reform in developing countries including Indonesia include lack of law enforcement, corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy, rapid economic growth accompanied by the expansion of the industrial sector that marginalizes the agrarian sector, policy formulation that does not meet the needs, as well as resistance from land-owning groups in Indonesia (Cahyana, 2014).

In their review, Melysa, Murtikusuma, Setiawan, Hidayat, and Maulidi (2025) noted that the fundamental factor in land reform failure is a government more

aligned with the interests of landlords and corporations. A differing opinion to Melysa, Murtikusuma, Setiawan, Hidayat, & Maulidi (2025) was expressed by Hsiung Bingyuan in the article "On Resolving the Problems Entailed by the Rent Reduction Act of Taiwan's Land Reform." In his article, Hsiung Bingyuan (1992) argued that the deadlock between peasants and landlords was caused by laws and policies that failed to meet their needs. However, policy products are usually not class-neutral. In the case of developing countries, the opinion of Melysa, Murtikusuma, Setiawan, Hidayat, and Maulidi (2025) is more accurate because policy failures are caused mainly by the government siding with corporate interests, resulting in no progressive land reforms, which in turn leads to the perpetuation of the concentration control of land to the land-owning and capitalist class and the worsening of land conflicts (Melysa, Murtikusuma, Setiawan, Hidayat, & Maulidi, 2025).

Evidence of the failure of land reform, which has hindered development, particularly causing social inequality, is explained in the article "Inequality and Poverty of Privately Owned Forest Farmers in Rural Areas of Indonesia." This article examines the influence of socio-economic conditions on inequality, poverty, and the dynamics of plantation farmers through a micro-case study of three villages in Ciamis Regency, West Java. The research results show that limited land ownership leads to social inequality in rural areas. Furthermore, the more limited the farmer's household's access to land ownership, the greater the number of people living in poverty will be. Then, to meet social needs, farm households with more limited land access also rely on income from non-agricultural work (Fauziyah, Awang, Suryanto, & Achmad, 2021).

### **3. Land Reform as the Foundation for Successful Industrialization**

The article discussing land reform as the foundation for successful industrialization is covered in four articles. The first article is entitled "A bloodless social revolution: Land Reform and Multiple Cropping in Cold War Taiwan, 1950-1979." It discusses land reform programs and agricultural diversification technologies in Taiwan during the period 1950-1979. The article notes that land reform, through land redistribution and agricultural diversification, has driven positive social change in Taiwan. Land redistribution, supported by food technology, has increased rural agricultural productivity and improved the quality of life of rural communities (Chu, 2024).

The opinion that good industrialization must be supported by equality and social justice in rural areas is supported by the article titled "East Asian Industrialization and Agriculture," written by Grabowski. Based on case studies in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan (East Asia), Grabowski (1993) argues that countries with high social inequalities will experience low development growth due to the concentration of economic and social power in the hands of a few industries and the government. Moreover, countries that subordinate the agricultural sector to the

industrial sector will not reach a high level of industrialization. Conversely, countries that support the agricultural sector while promoting industrialization, as in East Asia, will have a positive impact on industrial development (Grabowski, 1993).

This was also emphasized in a journal article entitled "Why East Asia Overtook Latin America: Agrarian Reform, Industrialisation, and Development." In the article, Kay (2002) argued that three factors influence the success of land reform in East Asian countries compared to Latin America, with implications for the success of their industrializations. First, the capacity of the government in East Asia can promote land redistribution to small and peasant farmers. In contrast, governments in Latin America failed to redistribute land from landlords to small farmers. Second, land reform in East Asia succeeded in shaping a more just and equal social structure and in supporting economic growth by providing farmers with incentives. On the other hand, land reform in Latin America failed to create an equitable land-ownership structure because landlords still controlled large tracts of land and sought significant incentives. Third, the governments of East Asian countries were capable of designing industrial policies that created mutual benefits between industry and agriculture. In contrast, those of Latin American countries were unable to do so (Kay, 2002).

In addition to these three factors, in the article entitled "Land Reform in East and Southeast Asia: A Comparative Approach," based on a case comparison between Taiwan and the Philippines, Ledesma (1983) argued that the Taiwanese government was more effective and committed in supporting land reform compared to the Philippine government. Furthermore, the role of farmers in Taiwan also contributed to the success of land reform. Conversely, land reform in the Philippines did not proceed well due to the lack of farmer participation and resistance from the land-owning class (Ledesma, 1980).

## Method

This research uses a qualitative, descriptive research method, aimed at providing a detailed depiction of the phenomenon, clarifying it, and documenting it (Neumann, 2014). In collecting data, this study uses a literature study. The literature study is used to analyze supporting research data from various literature sources. The documents used are secondary sources, including books and journal articles.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. Defeat in Mainland China and Containing Communism

The Taiwan government's commitment to implementing land reform stemmed from the Kuomintang's defeat by the Chinese Communist Party, which successfully took control of Mainland China. The Kuomintang's (Nationalist) defeat on the mainland forced them to flee and establish a new state on the island of Formosa. One

analysis of the cause of the Kuomintang's defeat is the loss of support from rural laborers in Mainland China, who preferred to join the Chinese Communist Party, which ultimately won the struggle on the mainland (Kim & Wang, 2024). Furthermore, the Taiwan administration under the Kuomintang also had a history of conflict with the local population of Formosa in February 1947, which resulted in nearly 10,000 deaths. This experience prompted the Kuomintang, which by December 7, 1949, controlled only the island of Formosa, to emulate the strategies and tactics of the Chinese Communist Party by mobilizing rural farmers through land reform (Chiang, Fan, & Hsu, 2025).

The Taiwanese government sought to curb the infiltration of communist ideology by implementing land reform. At that time, relations between landlords and tenant farmers were highly unequal and disadvantageous to tenant farmers. When Taiwan was still a Japanese colony, land rent was based on a fixed lease agreement paid in kind at the end of the year, determined by the landlord based on the land's potential yield, with about 50% for rice fields and around 35% for dry land from the tenant farmers' income (Yeh, 1996; 2001; 2007 in Kim & Wang, 2024).

After independence from Japan, productive agricultural land became a key issue due to the destruction of rural areas caused by the war (Booth & Deng, 2017; Kim & Wang, 2024). After the war, fertile farmland became scarce. On the other hand, the population continued to grow. Furthermore, land rent imposed by landowners on tenant farmers increased to 56.8% of the crop yield in 1948 (Kim & Wang, 2024). Additionally, in 1944, landowners in Taiwan controlled 32 percent of the total land. Ironically, 32% of the land was owned by only 3.5% of the rural population in Taiwan (Wang, 2002). Around 1948, farmers in Taiwan were predominantly tenant farmers or those with less than 1 hectare of land, resulting in low incomes (Kim & Wang, 2024).

These social conditions caused the Taiwanese government to feel threatened by the infiltration of communist ideology in Taiwan. This is because when social inequality is high, communism becomes an appealing ideology among the poor, as it offers the ideal of a classless society that is fair, equal, and free from poverty. On the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party had successfully carried out land reforms in mainland China (the People's Republic of China). At that time, from fighting the Kuomintang to gaining control of mainland China, the Chinese Communist Party implemented a land reform program by seizing landlords' land and distributing it to farming communities that were managed collectively. The program succeeded in improving the quality of life for the majority of farm laborers in the PRC (Harris Jr., 1969), causing the Taiwanese government to worry that peasants on Formosa Island might be inspired by the success of the Chinese Communist Party's program and attempt to overthrow the Kuomintang in Taiwan, which controlled Formosa Island.

## 2. The Land Reform Process in Taiwan

The land reform process in Taiwan was supervised by the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR), a semi-governmental organization funded by the United States. Essentially, the JCRR was established in 1948, when the Kuomintang still controlled mainland China, but after the Kuomintang's defeat, the JCRR was also relocated to the island of Formosa, where the state of Taiwan was founded (Tun-jen, 2001; Chiang, Fan, & Hsu, 2025).

The Taiwanese Government implemented the land reform model with the support of the United States. The land reform model implemented in Taiwan with the support of the United States differs from those carried out in Communist states such as North Korea, Cuba, China, and North Vietnam (Chiang, Fan, & Hsu, 2025). In Communist states, land reform involved the redistribution of land from landowners to peasants through coercion and without compensation to the landowners, followed by collective ownership of land by the farmers without private ownership. In contrast, land reform in Taiwan and several non-Communist states still involved the redistribution of land from landowners to peasants, but this was done through compensation to former landowners (Shin, 1976, in Chiang, Fan, & Hsu, 2025). Furthermore, the peasants who were granted land had private ownership rights (Chiang, Fan, & Hsu, 2025).

The land reform in Taiwan is divided into three phases, each with its own model. The first phase began in 1949 with the enactment of the Rent Reduction Law. This phase is considered part of the land reform phase, even though land redistribution to peasants had not yet been carried out. In 1949, only regulations regarding land rent were applied. The Taiwanese Government set land rent based on 26 levels of land productivity, with a maximum rent of 37.5% of the annual yield. This law required all contracts to be made in writing, to be valid for at least six years, and established a Committee to oversee contracts and resolve disputes. However, this policy was not yet able to address the fundamental issues of social inequality and land access in rural Taiwan (Yeh, 2012, in Kim & Wang, 2025).

The second phase began in 1951 and lasted until 1958, using the method of selling publicly owned land. The lands sold to the farmer were public-owned land that consisted of confiscated land, the majority of which was formerly controlled by Japanese companies during their occupation of Taiwan (Williams, 1980, in Kim & Wang, 2025). Additionally, the Taiwanese Government also sold local government-owned lands to farmers at a price set at 2.5 times the total annual yield, payable "in-kind" in 20 installments over two years. In the purchasing process, the amount of land that a farmer could buy was limited. As a result of this policy, about 139,688 households purchased land, with an average purchase size of approximately 0.5 hectares per household (Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022; Kim & Wang, 2025).

The third phase began in 1953 and is known as the 'authentic' land reform program. The third phase became the most important because it clearly established a program allocating land to peasants and was carried out on a large scale. Under this program, the Taiwanese Government would take over landlords' lands if the

landlords owned more than 3 hectares of rice fields and 6 hectares of dry land. As compensation, landlords were given land bonds (claims on future agricultural yields) or shares in state-owned industrial companies (Liu, 1992, in Kim & Wang, 2025). To ensure accountability and alignment with targets, the JCRR also conducted cadastral surveys to identify landowners' land (Kim & Wang, 2025).

In order to prevent the reconsolidation of land in the hands of certain landlords, land recipients were prohibited from selling the land for 10 years unless the land had been paid off earlier. At this stage, around 143,568 hectares of land were transferred to 194,568 farming households in Taiwan (Chen, 1961, in Kim & Wang, 2025). In other words, this policy almost eliminated the top landholding group and drastically reduced the number of peasants (Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022).

This land reform continued until 1975. According to MOI statistics, 286,000 peasants and small farmers benefited from the land reform. The land reform carried out by the Taiwanese Government freed more than 139,000 hectares of land. The Taiwanese Government successfully distributed land to peasants. Thus, the land ownership gap in Taiwan was not extreme (Yueh, 2009). In addition, the land reform increased agricultural output by 80% during the period from 1952 to 1964, or about 5% per year, and increased farmers' household incomes from 1952 to 1972 (Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022).

The success was also supported by government assistance in agricultural infrastructure. The Taiwanese Government built various types of infrastructure such as irrigation and roads, provided credit and other financial services, arranged the distribution of inputs (chemical fertilizers, high-quality seed varieties adapted to local soil conditions, water pumps for drainage, etc.), marketing of produce, price stabilization, and the strengthening and transformation of farmer associations (Cheng, 2001 in Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022). In addition, the Taiwanese Government supported this by allocating substantial resources to agricultural research (Fei et al., 1979, in Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022).

### **3. The Role of the State in Industrialization**

One of the main strengths of the success of land reform and industrialization in Taiwan is the significant role of the state in the economy, known as the developmental state. In its implementation, the Taiwanese government designs and intervenes in the economic sector, and even directly engages in economic activities in specific key sectors to stimulate growth and economic expansion (Rogers, Castree, & Kitchin, 2013).

Compared to other countries such as South Korea and Indonesia, Bourguignon & Platteau (2022) argue that Taiwan's advantage in implementing its developmental state lies in a bureaucracy that is autonomous and tends to keep a distance from landlord groups and capital owners, allowing the Taiwanese government to implement policies that benefit peasants and compel capital owners to act in accordance with the government's directives. This capability was made possible by the success of the land reform, which weakened landlords' economic power (Kay,

2002). Conversely, it strengthened the state's power in the economy; thus, obstacles from capital owners to various government policies in Taiwan tended to be weak and minimal.

This condition gives the Taiwanese government significant power, especially in controlling various economic matters. Thus, it can implement many policies, such as price controls, trade policies, taxation, industrial direction, and so on (Kay, 2002).

In addition, another factor that enabled the Taiwanese government to implement land reform successfully and industrialize was Taiwan's inheritance of a robust industrial base from the Japanese colonial era. After Japan left Taiwan, the quality of Human Resources (HR) in Formosa Island was already quite good. Moreover, the Taiwanese government also inherited well-developed infrastructure in education, public health, agricultural organizations, markets, and finance, meaning it only needed to restore this infrastructure. Additionally, there were 494 large enterprises in heavy industries and 484 companies in light industries; over time, these large enterprises were nationalized into State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), while the smaller enterprises were auctioned to the public (Tun-jen, 2001).

#### **4. Transformation from Agriculture to Industry**

In developing its domestic industry, the Taiwanese government extensively used the agricultural sector to support industrialization. Firstly, the Taiwanese government utilized the large agricultural surplus to fund the country's industrialization, supported by state monopolies over the banking sector (Tun-jen, 2001). Through this revenue, the Taiwanese government promoted the expansion of the chemical fertilizer, plastics, and textile industries. Chemical fertilizers were produced by state-owned companies and also used to support the agricultural sector, ultimately increasing agricultural output and farm household incomes. The textile industry continued to be operated by existing companies. The plastics, synthetic fibers, glass, and food industries were also handed over to the private sector (Tun-jen, 2001).

Second, the Taiwanese government encouraged landlords who had received compensation for their redistributed land to develop non-agricultural businesses in the manufacturing, financial, and trade sectors (Kay, 2002). Over time, these non-agricultural enterprises would absorb labor and increase the productivity of rural communities. Third, with the rise in farmers' household incomes, the Taiwanese government encouraged farmers to save and begin investing their income to develop the manufacturing and service industries. Furthermore, the Taiwanese government established savings and banking institutions specifically for farmers' households, which later played a role in supporting rural industrialization.

In other words, the Taiwanese government began encouraging farmers to develop industries in rural areas and even promised to provide capital assistance to help them industrialize. (Yueh, 2009). In the process, community investments in

these rural areas gave rise to food, textile and apparel, metal, chemical, and machinery industries. (Bourguignon & Platteau, 2022).

Fourth, productivity in the agricultural sector and rural industrialization produce labor with relatively low wages, thereby accelerating the accumulation of capital by industrial owners to expand their businesses. Relatively low wages are possible because workers can access affordable food.

## Conclusion

Taiwan's success in achieving developed-country status can be attributed to its land reform policies, which supported the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. This success also highlights the importance of a strong state, an autonomous bureaucracy, and appropriate economic management policies. One of the initial motives and foreign influences for land reform was the commitment of the Taiwan government, controlled by the Kuomintang, to implement land reform through the redistribution of land to tenant farmers as a correction for the Kuomintang's defeat by the Chinese Communist Party in mainland China and to maintain economic and political stability. The Taiwan government believed that public resistance to the state could be mitigated if social inequalities related to access to land could be reduced through land redistribution.

In its course, land reform in Taiwan played an important role in reducing land ownership inequality, weakening the power of landlords, increasing agricultural productivity, and creating a more just social foundation. More equitable land ownership and social structure facilitated Taiwan's industrialization by increasing rural households' income and national revenue through greater access to land and higher agricultural productivity. National revenue, generated from taxes in the agricultural sector, could be transformed by the Taiwanese government into financial resources to build industries. On the other hand, the increased income of rural households provided the government with an opportunity to encourage peasants to save in rural banks and invest their savings in developing industrial enterprises. These industrial investments in rural areas ultimately drove Taiwan's industrialization, allowing industries to continue to grow. Investments in the industrial sector in rural areas ultimately drove industrialization in Taiwan, where these industries continued to grow with government incentives and support from rural banks.

Regarding the role of the state, the Taiwanese government plays a crucial role through its involvement in designing, directing, and intervening in the economy, as well as directly managing key sectors. A strong state role can be inferred from the autonomy of the Taiwanese government bureaucracy and the weakening of landlords and capital owners resulting from land reform policies implemented since the 1950s. An autonomous and strong Taiwanese government enables Taiwan to control various economic sectors, including taxation and banking monopolies, as well as export-import planning. The Taiwanese government ultimately utilizes this

capability to manage the transformation from agriculture to industry through land reform and rural-based industrial development.

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