

In Search of the Blue Bird; What is it that you long for?

Part 2: WTO and the market economy

“Here all kinds of happiness are available. Happiness to have money, happiness to lazily fool around, happiness to eat without hunger, to drink without thirst, and happiness to make others unhappy.”
“These are not happiness at all! If they are what you call happiness, I want none of them!”

As one of the indicators of poverty, people often refer to money and other material possessions. The World Trade Organization (WTO) attempts to control the movement of goods by programming the monetary economy on a worldwide scale (see page 4 for an outline of the WTO). What is the WTO, and what kind of influence does it have? Is it something which brings us “dreams”, “hope” or “happiness”? During the period of its preceding structure, GATT, it was aiming at liberalization of world trade, but agricultural products were excluded from its target items. This was because, unlike industrial manufacture which can be measured on a uniform scale and standard wherever it occurs, agricultural production is influenced by various climatic and other natural features and different countries have different conditions for their agricultural activities. Therefore, the comparative production theory, which suggests that commodities of relatively cheaper production costs should be produced domestically and other commodities should be imported for the sake of trade and economic efficiency, could not be readily applied to agricultural products. However, in the 1980s when there was a surplus of agricultural products in many parts of the world, the former “sanctuary” of agricultural sectors also started to be targeted by the trade liberalization movement, mainly from exporting countries with strong agricultural productivity. That it is better, from the global (in fact, American) viewpoint, to treat the world’s agricultural market as one and to let countries with higher efficiency in production supply the market, is their logic.

Developing countries are flooded with consumer goods that they are compelled to buy from developed countries. Electric appliances, cars, clothes, etc. from developed countries look attractive to the eyes of those in developing countries, and are in high demand. However, you have to have money to purchase them. Then, you have to find a way earn cash. Then, even those engaged in agriculture in developing countries start producing cash crops, even sacrificing their traditional life patterns (i.e. self-sufficient production system) and the natural environment, solely in order to earn cash.

On the other hand Japan, one of the exporters of such foreign industrial products to developing countries, has started to see a huge amount of agricultural products (with the exception of rice) flowing into the country from outside as a result of tariff reform. Domestic agricultural products in Japan, which are far costlier - as the high production costs and salaries are reflected in the prices -cannot compete in the international market. With imports of cheap agricultural products into the domestic market, the profits for domestic farmers decline drastically, leading them to give up agriculture. This is already happening in reality. As a result, an increasing amount of farmlands will be left unmanaged, and the unattended lands will be impoverished and lose their ecological functions. In developing countries also, under the name of “globalization” and “the market economy” regional individualities are collapsing with farmlands left spoilt, while people’s lives are not necessarily attaining the “wealth / affluence” they long for.

Looking at it this way, the participation in the WTO system means there are some people who gain benefit / profit from the system, for example many of those in developed countries, but at the same time there are a number of people in developing countries who are forced to sacrifice their traditional lifestyles in the name of trade liberalization. Also, the WTO system may contribute to creating a terrifying uniformity in the world by breaking up regional individualities and traditions. WTO mentions the importance of prevention of environmental destruction due to development for trade globalization, but it is highly questionable whether it considers the crucial necessity of retaining the ecological functions of existing agricultural lands.

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