

In Focus

30 August 2019

Nation-Empire: Reframing Japan's Intense Colonial Mobilisation

In the EAI weekly seminar organised by the East Asian Institute (National University of Singapore), Dr Sayaka Chatani, assistant professor/presidential young professor at the Department of History, National University of Singapore, compared Japan's mobilisation of soldiers in its colonies to the home islands in her presentation. The presentation was based on some chapters from her newly released book, *Nation Empire: Ideology and Rural Youth Mobilization in Japan and its colonies*, published in 2019. The methodology used in the project was a bottom-up comparison of four village cases and individuals across the empire. The research also focused on the overarching institutional spread and long-term presence of the Seinendan (youth associations) as an anchor, so as to highlight the interactions between discursive construction of "rural youth" and actual experiences.

The main argument of the presentation was Japan's attempts at "nation-empire" building. Japan's assimilation measures were primarily ideological mobilisation. However Japan's ideological mobilisation did not work and social dynamics in each locality mattered. In many areas, there was a sense of self-transformation from a perpetual peasant youth to a career-savvy modern youth (the volunteer soldiers as the most prestigious achievement). There was a shared identity among many of the volunteer soldiers from rural areas and this group sought to gain social recognition. The rural youth also felt a moral superiority over urban youth, intellectual youth, and people from the older generation, and as a result fought many emotionally charged social battles with other social groups. The rural youth had much in common with the Japanese national-imperial ideology. This presentation thus breaks a taboo with its comparison of the embrace of Japanese nationalism by colonial youth and that by Japanese youth, addressing the differences and similarities between Taiwan and Korea, and highlighting the importance of agrarian ideals rather than the official sanctioned ideology of the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere".

The first part of the presentation was about the idea of "volunteer soldier fever" in Japanese colonies of Taiwan and Korea. During the period of the Pacific War, the number of Taiwanese applicants to the Japanese army was about 600,000 in a year on average, while there were only about 1,300 vacancies in a year. This showed that there was an intense desire of local Taiwanese to join the Japanese army. A similar situation was evident in Korea when applications were open to the Koreans in 1938. However, the competitiveness ratio was much lower than that of Taiwan, as there were fewer applicants in Korea. The history of rural youth training institutions was also touched upon. It was originally set up in 1905 after the Russo-Japanese war and in 1915 there was a standardisation of the "Seinendan". The first mandatory youth school was set up in 1939.

The second part of the presentation covered the idea of agrarian nationalism which referred to taking charge of agriculture as a Japanese and increasing the prosperity of the country for one to become an imperial farmer. The imperial farmer could then lay aside his sickles and take up swords to join the military.

The last part of the presentation focused on the social-mobility complex in Hsinchu, Taiwan. The rural youth institutions fostered bonding among the youths. The experiences the rural youth underwent in the training also created a sense of rivalry with urban youths who were seen as weaker than the rural youths.

In conclusion, Dr Sayaka Chatani reiterated her point that local social contexts determined the dynamics of mobilisation with the constant and unpredictable shift in social tensions. There was regional diversity, while there was also a pattern in social mechanism that enabled Japan's rural youth mobilisation. "Agrarian nationalism", rather than "Pan-Asianism" or "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere", mattered more to these rural youths. Lastly, emotions facilitated self-discipline and self-mobilisation.

This summary reflects the personal opinion(s) of the seminar speaker(s) and should in no way be attributed to the East Asian Institute.