

JAPANESE COLONIALISM AND THE INVESTIGATION OF TAIWANESE OLD CUSTOMS

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Modern Japan's effort to come to grips with contemporary Chinese society was pioneered by the Provisional Commission for the Investigation of Taiwanese Old Customs (Rinji Taiwan Kyūkan Chōsakai, hereafter abbreviated as the Commission) under the auspices of the Government-General of Taiwan, which administered the island as a colony from 1895 to 1945. In terms of the founding concept and methods of research, the Commission was the prototype of the Southern Manchurian Railway Company's (hereafter abbreviated as Mantetsu) famous Research Bureau. This was no doubt due to the instrumental roles played by Gotō Shinpei and Okamatsu Santarō in both organizations.

As Taiwan's Chief Civil Administrator (*minsei kyokuchō*) from 1898 to 1906, Gotō lobbied vigorously for the creation of a research arm in the colonial administration. Meanwhile, recruited by Gotō to head the first division in the Commission, Okamatsu was the guiding intellectual force in the Commission during its most productive years. Pre-dating Mantetsu's research on mainland China by some eight years, the Commission represents Japan's first systematic effort to generate authoritative knowledge on contemporary Chinese society on the basis of information obtained in the field.

Created in 1901 by an imperial edict, the Commission comprised two divisions charged with studying Taiwan's legal customs and economy. The colonial administration, through its spokesmen Gotō and Okamatsu, justified the Commission's mission mostly in utilitarian terms. It argued that a sound understanding of the internal workings of Chinese communities in Taiwan was essential to the successful administration and development of the Empire's newly acquired territory.

The first division was to investigate Taiwan's legal customs, which would help the authorities strengthen its control over the island's population by coopting indigenous social institutions. It was to clarify especially property rights so that land could be easily traded under the new regime and a rational tax base could be established. The second division was to concentrate on economic activities. The information it gathered was to aid not only the collection of commercial tax but also to help identify areas of potential growth. The Commission's work was thus intended to have direct bearings on the two issues of paramount urgency to the colonial administration, namely, internal security and financial viability.

Besides its colonial agenda, the Commission's research also differs from traditional

Japanese Sinology in terms of method. Field work occupied a prominent place in the research methodology laid down by Okamatsu. After consult relevant historical records, the researchers were to visit the towns and villages under investigation. There they were to question native informants and collect local records. Okamatsu stressed that the Commission's objective was to ascertain customs as they were really practised. To this end, Okamatsu claimed that the Commission's reports refrained from arbitrarily filling up loopholes in the field data or ironing out differences between field data and other records.

Therefore, the Commission not only adopted the "ethnographic" approach but went one step further to insist that data collected in the field were not subordinate to historical or archival sources. This approach contrasts with Tokugawa sinology which took the Classics and the standard histories as the main source of authoritative knowledge.

Given the Commission's express purpose to assist colonial rule, the picture of Chinese society that transpires from its reports cannot but reflect the interests of its political patron. While the second division's work on Taiwan was terminated prematurely, the first division's decade-long research revolved around two main topics: property (*zaisan*) and kinship (*jinji*). This bi-focal structure is found in all the reports produced by the first division, and it no doubt points to the Government-General's interest in maintaining a firm control over the land and the people of Taiwan.

In summary it may be observed that the Commission's work marks an important break in both focus and method with Japan's earlier mode of Chinese study. First, the Commission's attention to customary law is a significant advancement over the traditional preoccupation with ideal visions of society held by the Chinese elite. Second, the Commission's emphasis on field work signifies another advancement. In contrast to the earlier, exclusive emphasis on classical writings, the Commission regards field work as a necessary means for acquiring useful knowledge. In fact, it not only recognizes field work as a valid method, but invests field data with an authority that rivals that of other resources. It was such changes in focus and method that had enabled the Commission to generate a new picture of Chinese society wherein the commoners became the main characters whereas the state receded into the background.