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Japan, the Ryukyus and the Taiwan Expedition of 1874: toward reconciliation after 130 years

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By Nishida Masaru

[*We present two articles on a critical moment in the history of Japanese imperialism on Taiwan, the nature of the impact of colonialism on indigenous people, and contemporary ramifications of that history. In the first of these, "*Whither East Asia? Reflections in Light of the Japanese Colonial Experience on Taiwan*," Robert Eskildsen reflects on the broader issues of Japanese colonialism for contemporary East Asia in light of the 1874 Taiwan expedition and contemporary assessments of it. The second is Nishida Masaru's report on a commemoration of the expedition involving Japanese NGOs and villagers at the site of the Mudan Incident toward framing a people's reconciliation.* Japan Focus]

Modern Japan's first war of aggression in Asia was not the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Just six years after the Meiji Restoration, in May 1874, the Japanese Imperial government dispatched an expeditionary force to Taiwan. Government leaders justified their actions in the name of "retaliation" and "securing maritime safety," but their actual aim in sending approximately 3,600 former Satsuma samurai and Kumamoto soldiers was to take control of Taiwan.

The pretext for military action was related to events that took place three years earlier when Taiwanese aborigines killed 54 Ryukyuan fishermen after 69 of them were shipwrecked on the southern end of the island. In response, Japanese officials sent a protest to the Qing dynasty, but it was dismissed on the grounds that Chinese "civilization had not been extended to the region." Dissatisfied with that reply, Japanese leaders decided to use the killings as grounds for an attack.

The Japanese army's efforts at retaliation were more successful than its attempt to occupy Taiwan. After a series of violent skirmishes, the force captured several chieftains from the tribe deemed responsible and executed them.

1. Leaders of the Japanese expeditionary force pose with the headmen of several aborigine villages in 1874. Photo courtesy of the Taiwan Provincial Museum, Taipei.

Japanese officials abandoned hopes of conquering Taiwan after Britain and the United States intervened to encourage negotiations, even though the mission was launched in part

at the instigation of an American advisor to the Meiji government and enabled by expensive supply ships purchased from the two countries. Moreover, Japanese soldiers lost their will to fight after over half of their ranks contracted infectious and endemic diseases, which in the end killed one-sixth of all their members. The Japanese government did, however, achieve some "war victories." The most important triumph was recognition by the Qing dynasty that the Ryukyu Islands, which had previously paid tribute to both Japan and China, were officially "Japanese territory."

Breaking the Chains of Malice that Bind Nations

In Taiwan, the expedition is referred to simply as the "Mudan incident." I was invited to speak at an international symposium held last 24-25 November in the village of Mudan in southern Taiwan, where the killings and invasion took place. Even though the Taiwan expedition was the first overseas troop deployment by the Japanese government during the Meiji era, few people in Japan today are aware of it. For this reason, I would like to report on the symposium. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that it was organized by members of the Mudan tribe, whose ancestors were both aggressors and victims during the incident.

The first day began with a program in the town hall. After conference organizers presented each panelist with a vest on which the Mudan crest was emblazoned and set wreaths of flowers upon our heads, the town's mayor offered a few words of welcome and then two beautifully dressed shamans offered a prayer. Next, a group of primary school students, arrayed in brightly colored ethnic costume danced and sang, and a group of teenagers performed a musical arrangement using traditional instruments. Following these performances, Professor Matayoshi Seikiyo of Okinawa University talked about various documents he had collected over many years of researching the incident.

Then conference participants and local residents embarked for a bit of fieldwork. We boarded a large bus that transported us to the location where the 54 Ryukyu islanders were murdered, to the beach where the Japanese army landed and established its staff officer headquarters, and to Shimen, where the decisive battle took place.

The second day was dedicated to presentations and discussion of the incident. In his keynote address, "Modern Japan and the Taiwan Incident," Professor Matayoshi argued that the historical importance of the incident was twofold: first, it resulted in the "verdict that the Ryukyu islands belonged to Japan," and second, it "served as a stepping stone for the later occupation and colonization of Taiwan by Japan." He also pointed out that the incident provided Japan with valuable experience that it would use later in its "Southern Advance."

2. Colorful woodblock prints spread news, originally reported in Japanese newspapers, about the Taiwan Expedition. This print depicts the submission of aborigines to Japanese forces. Photo courtesy of Waseda University Library, Tokyo.

Professor Matayoshi's talk was impressive in another way. As a "representative of Japan," he prefaced his remarks by apologizing for the suffering that had been inflicted on the Mudan people beginning with the expedition and culminating with the colonization of Taiwan. In turn, Mudan participants, as "representatives of their people," expressed their regret that their ancestors had not overcome the language and culture gap and had killed the Ryukyuans. In this way, some 130 years later, reconciliation was achieved.

Such expressions may seem insignificant, but I think these acts of cutting the chains of malice that bind nations serve as an example that others need to follow if we are to achieve world peace and security.

Presenters at the conference included five Japanese researchers, six scholars from northern and southern Taiwan, and seven local Mudan researchers and teachers. The venue on the second day was a beautiful multi-tiered international conference center that overlooks a dam-construction project. Over 80 others from inside and outside the prefecture attended the conference.

I presented a paper on "Discussion of the 'Taiwan Expedition' in Contemporary Japanese Publications." At that time, the Japanese government had not yet recognized the power of the media and only one newspaper, the *Tokyo Nichinichi Shinbun,* sent an unofficial war correspondent to Taiwan. Perhaps because the government did not attempt to systematically control reports of the conflict, as it did from the Sino-Japanese War onward, coverage of the incident is striking for its frank assessments of Japanese territorial ambitions in Taiwan and China.

Japanese newspapers described the bravery of Japanese troops, the unremitting resistance of the Mudan, the plunder of local foodstuffs, such as chestnuts, sweet potatoes, swine, poultry, and liquor, and destruction of property, including the burning of homes, by the Japanese army, the suffering of the majority of Japanese soldiers from endemic illnesses such as malaria, and Japanese fears that Qing armies might retaliate.

3. Many of the woodblock prints about the expedition glorified Japan's victories. This print depicts the Japanese victory over the Mudan in the decisive battle at "Sekimon" (Shimen). Photo courtesy of Tokyo University Digital Museum (http://www.um.u-tokyo.ac.jp/publish_db/1999news/04/404/40411.html#Anchor-46919)

Two presentations were particularly thought provoking. Koketsu Atsushi, a professor at Yamaguchi University, in his presentation "The Taiwan Expedition and the Establishment of Imperial Japan," analyzed the expedition as an event that destroyed the Chinese-centered suzerain-vassal system and led toward an order based on international law. And a young Mudan researcher, who based her research on stories about the incident told by older tribal members, suggested that the killings of the Ryukyuans was motivated not by hatred, but by linguistic and cultural misunderstandings.

Similarities with the Plight of Soldiers Sent to Iraq

I came away from the conference with the distinct impression that the significance of the Taiwan Expedition is not limited to the events of 130 years ago.

Perhaps comparing the expedition to the United States' current war in Iraq might be instructive. This conflict, like the Taiwan Expedition, depends on flimsy pretexts and resulted in an attack and occupation by a foreign army, many deaths, and the destruction of property. In both instances, those doing the killing and being killed in this "miserable hell" are ordinary and poor people. In the case of the expedition, the Japanese soldiers were either poor younger sons of farmers or former samurai from Satsuma who had lost their hereditary occupations as warriors.

Nishida Masaru is Director of the Nishida Masaru Peace Office and a representative of the Colonial Culture Association. This article appeared in Shukan Kinyobi on February 11, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus, November 20, 2005. Translated by Japan Focus associate Aaron Skabelund

(ahs39@columbia.edu), a postdoctoral research fellow at Hokkaido University and author of "Can the Subaltern Bark? Imperialism, Civilization, and Canine Cultures in Nineteenth-Century Japan," in JAPANimals: History and Culture in Japan 's Animal Life, ed. Gregory M. Pflugfelder and Brett L. Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).