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Break Up to Make Up: The Destruction of a Myth

Motoe Terami-Wada

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Review Article

Break Up to Make Up: The Destruction of a Myth

MOTOE TERAMI-WADA

THE MYTH AND THE REALITY OF THE JAPANESE "BENGUET EMIGRANTS" IN THE PHILIPPINES, 1903-1905.

By Shinzo Hayase. Tokyo: Dobun-kan, 1989. 292 pages.

INTRODUCTION

The author, Dr. Shinzo Hayase, an assistant professor at the Kagoshima University in Japan, is not totally unfamiliar to readers of *Philippine Studies*. His articles entitled "Tribes on the Davao Frontier, 1899-1941" and "American Colonial Policy and the Japanese Abaca Industry in Davao, 1898-1941" appeared in this journal in 1985.

Looking over these titles, one gets the impression that his main concern is the Davao frontier society and the Japanese abaca industry. Indeed his Ph.D. dissertation is titled "Tribes, Settlers and Administration on a Frontier: Economic Development and Social Change in Davao, Southeastern Mindanao, the Philippines, 1899-1941," and was submitted to Murdoch University in Australia in 1984. How then did Hayase travel northward from Southern Mindanao over land and sea and end up with a work on the early Japanese immigrant workers in Northern Luzon?

The journey began while Hayase was conducting research for his dissertation. In the process, he came across documents that shattered some of his beliefs regarding the role of the Japanese laborers constructing the Benguet Road, later known as Kennon Road, in Northern Luzon. Like many other Japanese, he had always held that the Benguet Road was completed mainly by the toil and sweat of these early Japanese workers. They were glorified as being braver and more diligent than the other laborers.

The documents he saw, however, indicated no such fact. Why and how then, Hayase wondered, did such a myth come to be? His curiosity became strong enough to make him temporarily shelve his dissertation research for the purpose of looking into the matter.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

As the book is written in Japanese, I shall devote more space than is usual to the summary.

Five chapters and an Epilogue follow the Introduction. The latter reviews the existence of the myth in various sources and cites reference materials. The first three chapters trace how the Benguet emigrants came to be. Chapter Four achieves the primary purpose of the book, which is to depict the real situation of the Benguet emigrants based on primary sources. Chapter Five tackles the second purpose, which is to look into how the myth was created vis-a-vis the emergence of modern Japan and Southeast Asia. The Epilogue discusses the third purpose, which is to explore whether or not the myth had an effect on the historical relations between Japan and Southeast Asia, in particular the Philippines.

In the Introduction entitled "Image of the 'Benguet Emigrants' in Japan and Historical Materials," Hayase starts off by looking into how the "Benguet Story" has been told in Japan in novels, a stage script, and news reel commentaries, among others. He likewise examines historical descriptions by the Japanese of the Benguet Road construction, including the reports of the Japanese Consul General in Manila and the reminiscences of the workers themselves.

Hayase then cites the available materials on the subject found in the United States (US) National Archives and Records Service and the Manuscript Division of the US Library of Congress. For the Philippine side, he looked into the Philippine newspapers and magazines of the time.

Before focusing on the myth, the author first discusses the political, economic and social factors in Japan which gave rise to the existence of numerous emigrants. This he does in Chapter One, entitled "Japan and the Philippines at the Turn of the Century."

Japanese society was then undergoing a volatile transition period from a feudal to a modern capitalist economy which displaced a number of people from each social class, especially the warriors, merchants, small farmers, and fisherfolk. They started to leave Japan as early as the 1870s for lands belonging to the Western imperialist powers. Most were unskilled laborers. Hayase calls them "'Asian-type' emigrants" upon observing a similar type of emigration in India and China with the advent of the global capitalist system.

A decade later, Japan began to send government-backed emigrant-settlers to Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan. The author considers this phenomenon analogous to that of European emigrants leaving for the colonized areas, and he coins the term "'European-type' emigrants" to refer to them.

Japan thus showed manifestations of being an imperialist as well as an underdeveloped country. The emigrants who left for the Philippines undoubtedly belonged among the "'Asian-type' Emigrants." They came to this country because it had a new colonial ruler, the US, whose immediate concern was the construction of physical infrastructure.

In Chapter Two, aptly titled "The Outline of the Benguet Road Construction," the author traces the building of the Benguet Road to Baguio. He reviews the reasons for the development of Baguio and shares other historical tidbits

such as his description of the start of construction on 15 January 1901 and of the appointment of the third supervisor named Major Kennon, after whom the road would later be named.

Chapter Three, "The Workers of the Benguet Road Construction," takes a closer look at the construction workers on the Benguet Road, among them Igorots, Filipino lowlanders, "Americans" (which encompassed the North Americans, South Americans, and Europeans), Hindus, Chinese, and Japanese.

The Igorots were praised by the US supervisors as "worth three lowland Filipinos." On the other hand, the Filipino lowland workers were rated as "one-fifth or one-tenth of the white workers." Based on the records of the US Bureau of Insular Affairs, Hayase enumerates possible reasons for the reluctant performance of lowland Filipino workers, interpreted as laziness by the US colonizers. Some were the following: seeing the recruitment of laborers as *polo*, or labor servitude, a hallmark of the previous Spanish colonization; harsh working conditions; and some workers' resentment at being forcibly relocated as a result of the pacification campaign. Although he did not see any records indicating this, Hayase contemplates that not working hard could be sabotage or resistance efforts on the part of the lowland Filipino workers.

Other unsuccessful efforts by the US colonial government to recruit laborers included the sending of Bilibid prisoners in 1903, in part to decongest overcrowded prisons resulting from the arrest of numerous anti-US "out-laws." Hayase concludes that if they were indeed anti-U.S. guerrillas, then little cooperation could be expected. Chinese laborers were hired with high expectations, but most turned out to be heroin addicts. With the prohibition of Chinese entry into the US and its territories, the number of Chinese laborers further dwindled.

To supplement the ever-fluctuating number of workers, the thoughts of US administrators turned to Japanese labor. Accordingly in mid-June of 1903, Major Kennon paid a visit to the Japanese Consulate in Manila and requested 1,000 Japanese laborers. However, the laws prohibiting contract labor as well as limiting the entry of foreign immigrant workers to the US and its territories, posed legal problems, which took some time to sort out. It was decided that foreigners capable of skilled labor would be admitted through the Philippine customs.

Meanwhile, some forty Japanese who were already in Manila were sent to Benguet as early as July 1903. The first batches of Japanese workers were kept small, and not more than a total of 300 came in staggered groups in October of the same year.

Hayase admits that it is hard to estimate just how many of them worked on the Benguet Road construction, for not all of them went to Benguet. From the immigrations roster, he learns that some 5,000 Japanese arrived in 1903 and 1904. He estimates that about half of them did go to Benguet. However, only around 500 to 900 were employed at any given time, since the colonial government's policy was to hire more Filipinos and to limit the number of Japanese workers to 1,000.

At this point, the author makes a crucial distinction: He terms all the Japanese laborers who came to the Philippines "Benguet Workers," since they all engaged in the building of roads and other physical infrastructure.

The author also examines closely these Japanese laborers and the working conditions in the mountains. From Japanese and US official papers and from the memoirs of the Benguet workers, Hayase drew out the following description:

1. *Motives.* Economic betterment was the primary concern. Going to Hawaii or North America was the dream, but the salary in the Philippines was just as good as that in Hawaii, and procedures such as physical examination were relatively easier.
2. *Age.* A little over one-fifth were in their thirties, the age bracket which forms the highest percentage of the Japanese population. This meant that many had left wives and children at home.
3. *Status.* Two-thirds of them were heads of their households or were the eldest sons. This meant that the family's destiny depended solely on them.
4. *Places of Origin in Japan.* Most came from Fukuoka in Kyushu. Still others came mainly from Wakayama, Hiroshima, and Kumamoto, from where many workers had already left for other places like Hawaii.

Hayase recounts the working conditions. The Japanese were paid less than the Americans but more than the Filipinos. While these salaries should have enabled them to send money home, they fell into the temptations of drinking and gambling, and were likewise victimized by contractors. The food provided was not too bad, but the Japanese were not used to Western-style food and the rather dry Filipino rice. With no knowledge of tropical housing, the Japanese looked upon the nipa and bamboo huts as cheap. Hayase believes that the laborers' accounts on this matter may have been exaggerated to make their accommodations appear subhuman.

Both US and Japanese official documents indicate that about 200 Japanese died between October 1903 and March 1905 in accidents and from dysentery, beri-beri, and malaria. It is indeed a rather high death rate. Hayase postulates two causes: One reason could have been the communication problem. Sick Japanese workers may have been unable to express themselves until the gravity of their condition was observable. Hayase also believes that these men paid little attention to their own hygiene.

In the fourth chapter entitled "The Image of the 'Benguet Workers,'" the author turns to the evaluation of the Japanese road construction workers. Major Kennon, the supervisor, saw the Japanese as hardworking as long as they were under supervision. This comment resulted in the importation of more Japanese laborers.

How did the Japanese workers view themselves? They generally had a strong sense of solidarity, and were quick and alert. They believed that they were respected because they were doing an excellent job.

Japanese Consulate officials countered that if compared with Filipino and

Chinese workers, the Japanese workers were not better than these two other groups, their only positive distinctions being that they stayed in one place and engaged in the work in an orderly manner.

On this premise, Hayase concludes that the Japanese workers' contribution was not as great as claimed. The Benguet Road would have been finished even without them, contrary to what has been believed in Japan. At the most, it can be said that construction could have been delayed if it were not for the Japanese contribution. It is more plausible to say that the road was completed due to the competent supervision of Major Kennon as well as the amount of money spent on the construction.

The indisputable fact is that these Japanese immigrant laborers to the Philippines, the bulk of whom worked on the Benguet Road construction, did manage to send P160,000 to Japan in 1904. Another significant fact is that some 200 of these workers later left for Davao, laying the foundation for a Japanese community there that would eventually number 20,000.

The title "The Background of the Making of the Myth" indicates what the fifth and final chapter is all about. How then did the "Benguet Story" begin to circulate? It all started when the 1910 official report of the Japanese Consulate in Manila was published the following year. The original report had cited the shortcomings of the Japanese workers and the fact that prostitution was the main occupation of Japanese females. These unsavory items were omitted; however, the published version related only the positive characteristics of the Japanese workers. This revised version was later quoted by historians, thus perpetuating a picture of "hardworking Japanese laborers on the Benguet Road."

Why such distortions? Hayase offers the following insights: Having just won wars against China and Russia, Japan was on its way to joining the modern world of Western powers. Working under US supervision, however, gave the Japanese emigrants as well as the Consulate officials an inferiority complex. In reaction, a superiority complex over the Filipino and other Asian workers was developed, necessitating a stress on the superior points. The height of the "myth making" was in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The textbook for sixth grade elementary students in 1943 specifically underscores the fact that the Benguet Road was built by the efforts of the Japanese workers. This is understandable in a time of war, since the fighting spirit had to be agitated and invasion justified.

In any time and place, immigrant workers would consider it a shame not to come home with success. Because of their failure to send home the expected wealth as shown above, the Japanese workers may have felt a need to magnify the hardships in building the Benguet Road. They would have wanted to convey the fact that despite several obstacles, they were able to complete it because they were better workers.

In the Epilogue, Hayase expresses shock to find out that the same descriptions are still found in the contemporary writings he cited in the Introduction. A comic-tragic historical footnote is the building of a monument in Baguio in 1983 by the Filipino-Japanese Friendship Association of Northern Luzon, dedicating it to the Japanese workers. The Filipino members of the organiza-

tions must have believed what their Japanese friends had told them about the Japanese workers.

OBSERVATIONS

This work is of a scholarly nature, but the writing style is not so formal as to chase away readers not in the academe. They will also certainly find it interesting.

There are several high points in Hayase's account, especially those emphasized in the summary. Of particular import is his effort to place the phenomenon of Japanese immigration at the turn of the century within the Asian context.

The work can be improved in terms of organization. For instance, there is some repetition of points raised in different parts of the book, thus hampering the flow. This is probably due to the fact that some chapters were written and have been published separately. In addition, using two different systems of year-reckoning is confusing. For instance, one has to train oneself to automatically compute that Meiji 36 means 1903. Since the book deals not only with Japan but also with another country that does not use the same system, the more universal Western system of dating could have been utilized, and the Japanese era name shown in parenthesis. These points for improvement, however, hardly detract from the importance of the work.

Since it was the Japanese who created the myth, no one will disagree that it is their duty to destroy it. With the thorough use of dependable sources, one cannot help but be convinced by Hayase's presentation and arguments. On the side of the Philippines, he asks if there might also have been feelings of superiority over Japan, based on the fact that it was one of the first countries in Asia to accept Christianity and to be thoroughly Westernized. It must be noted that both countries used Westernization as a focal issue of comparison. While the Philippines boasted of cultural absorption, Japan upheld technological advancement.

The Japanese side of destroying the myth has just begun. Efforts toward this end include Ikehata Setsuho's "The Philippine Revolution and the Japanese Involvement," in *The Philippine-Japanese Relations at the Turn of the Century*, Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (Tokyo: Gaikokugo Daigaku, 1989). The article aims to destroy the myths regarding the motives and role of the Japanese involved in the Philippine revolution.

In this respect, *The Myth and the Reality of the Japanese "Benguet Emigrants" in the Philippines* is, no doubt, a significant and valuable contribution to the sparse literature on Philippine-Japanese relations. I hope that this work will eventually be made available to non-Japanese speakers.

There are also some myths created by Filipinos about Japan, such as "the grand preparation for the Japanese invasion of the Philippines." The process of myth-breaking on the part of the Philippines is thus urged as well. As Hayase has argued, sound relations are in great part based on the destruction of myths. The author has taken a significant stride toward furthering the establishment of a genuine relationship between the two countries, which cannot exist if one stands on false assumptions of superiority over the other.