Statement of Proposed Study or Research

James Homsey, Japan, History

Leveling the Legions: Suiheisha Struggles Against Discrimination in the Japanese Army

In 1926, twelve men were arrested for an alleged plot to bomb the Fukuoka army barracks. The arrest of these members of the Suiheisha, a rights group for the descendants of Japan’s outcasts, the hisabetsu burakumin, followed months of tense protests over discrimination in the regiment. Only a year later similar discrimination came dramatically to light when Private Kitahara Taisaku of the Gifu regiment directly petitioned the Emperor on this issue. Occurring in quick succession, these incidents shocked the nation and reflected a new level of tension surrounding the issue of discrimination in the self-proclaimed egalitarian army.

Scholars such as Shindō Toyō have largely followed the Suiheisha’s own contemporary narrative by portraying these incidents as a high point of resistance to ruling class oppression in prewar Japan. While not refuting this narrative, I seek to look beyond it to ask a number of questions. Why did the issue of discrimination in the army come to a head at this particular juncture? How was the subaltern Suiheisha able to confront an institution as powerful as the army, and why were army authorities so sensitive to this challenge? What can these incidents tell us about the state of civil-military relations and social movements at the time? Finally what long-term effects did these conflicts have on each institution?

Research Hypotheses

In addressing the above questions, my project develops three main arguments:

1.) A Challenge to Army Legitimacy. In 1925, army authorities instituted reforms to halt over a decade of decline in army prestige by recasting themselves as moral and educational leaders uniting Japan in preparation for total war. They sought to legitimize these reforms by portraying universal military education as leveling educational opportunity and spreading the responsibility for national defense. Because discrimination in the ranks laid bare the lack of equality or unity even within the army itself, public clashes over this issue directly challenged the legitimacy of the army’s entire platform. By examining the army’s attempts to address such challenges, I will explore the nature of civil-military relations at this time of army vulnerability.

2.) Appropriation of Army Ideology. I see the Suiheisha as having strategically co-opted elements of army ideology during the confrontations surrounding these incidents. By publicly ensnaring the army in their own rhetoric, the Suiheisha pressured the army to address the problem of discrimination in the ranks. By analyzing how the Suiheisha mobilized such strategies of appropriation and public confrontation alongside the Marxist ideology central to their organization, I will explore how they were able to continue effectively fighting for social reform in an increasingly repressive political environment.

3.) Long-term Mutual Impact: Finally, I will trace the implications of these encounters between the army and Suiheisha over time. As the incidents occurred during a period of flux for both the reforming army and the nascent Suiheisha, both were susceptible to outside influence. I will analyze how the appropriation of each other’s ideology in the mid-1920s could have influenced the development of each organization, and explore how this may have gradually paved the way for their cooperation in the late 1930s. My study will thus complicate the trope of the sudden "conversion" of Suiheisha members to statist ideology, while also examining the effect that the demands of the Suiheisha had on army thought. As these developments leading to the future cooperation between these organizations predated the 1931 Manchurian Incident, moreover, my study will also problematize the common narrative that designates the developments in Manchuria as the sudden point of departure in the militarization of Japan.
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By examining the interactions of the Suiheisha and the army, I will contribute to the literature on each. In contrast to scholars such as Ian Neary and Mahara Tetsuho who have mainly positioned their research on the Suiheisha within the broader field of left-wing political history, my work will reveal how the Suiheisha used a variety of strategies to navigate the political minefield of the time by examining the Suiheisha’s engagement with army thought. Literature on the army, meanwhile, tends to be top-down in focus, with little attention to the issue of civil-military relations. Richard Smethurst’s account of the army’s use of local village hierarchies and Stewart Lone’s concept of a “civil-military contract” have done much to address this gap. My contribution will be to look at civil-military relations as interest-driven intellectual interactions between the army and particular elements of society, thereby situating the army in the political intellectual atmosphere of prewar Japan.

Methodology / Research Plans and Academic Preparation

My study will be an intellectual and social history of two institutions situated in the broader social and political climate of prewar Japan. Informed by the burgeoning field of discursive institutionalism, as outlined by Colin Hay in The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions, my study takes seriously the role of discourse in effecting institutional change. By analyzing records of communication between and within the Suiheisha and the army, I will consider how discursive encounters surrounding the Fukuoka and Gifu incidents influenced each.

This project will require extensive archival research in Japan, as the majority of relevant documents remain unpublished. I plan to conduct most research in Tokyo. Professor Katō Yoko of Tokyo University, a foremost scholar of Japanese military history, has kindly offered to oversee my project. For army-related archival material, I plan to visit the National Institute of Defense Studies, the National Diet Library and the Tokyo University library. For more thorough and specialized collections related to the Suiheisha, I will take a six-week trip to the Buraku Liberation - Human Rights Research Center in Osaka and the Buraku Problem Research Center in nearby Kyoto, and travel to Gifu and Fukuoka to obtain material specific to the incidents of focus, visiting the Fukuoka Human-rights Research Center Corporation, the Gifu Historical Archives, and the prefectural libraries at each location. All of these facilities are open to the public. I will accomplish my research over twelve months in Japan, after which I will begin writing my thesis under the guidance of my adviser, Louise Young. I have taken fourth-year and classical Japanese, studied research methods in Japanese sources, and have written my MA thesis on a related topic, and am therefore prepared to carry this project out.

Project Goals

This project will culminate in a Ph.D. dissertation, later to be refined into a scholarly monograph. I hope that my work will help demystify the militarization of Japan for English speaking audiences in a manner that neither neglects the responsibility of the Japanese public nor goes too far in villainizing them as uniquely bellicose. I will do so by demonstrating how Japanese subjects pursuing their own interests could gradually find themselves associating with the army for reasons other than militarism. I also hope to spread awareness of the ongoing struggle of the hisabetsu burakanin by situating it in the larger trends of Japanese history. This study does not seek to paint the Suiheisha as a militaristic or collaborationist organization. Indeed it is the very oppositional nature of the Suiheisha to the authorities that makes their interaction with the army all the more revealing.
Personal Statement
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My decision to study Japanese history at the graduate level was neither the culmination of a lifelong dream, nor the result of a sudden revelation regarding my true calling. While an enthusiastic college professor inspired my choice of East Asian history as a major, the subject was still an interest to me rather than a vocation. My desire to learn more about the places I had studied, however, was keen enough that I decided to move to Japan as an English teacher in 2005. Little did I know that what was intended to be a one year sojourn abroad would extend to over four years, and ultimately provide the impetus to pursue a career in academia.

Despite the initial challenge of living in a new country, I quickly felt welcome in Japan. I was frustrated, however, to find myself frequently confronting stereotypes about Americans, and I initially responded by defensively grasping to the tired trope that the Japanese, as a homogenous society, simply did not appreciate the offensiveness of these stereotypes. Upon my first visit home, however; I was chagrined to find a familiar hue of cultural essentialism when my conversations with friends and family inevitably shifted to the subject of Japan. Worse yet, I came to see such assumptions reflected in myself. While I became less sensitive of stereotypes directed towards me, and more conscious of my own cultural assumptions, I couldn't help but feel that such essentialist thinking, even when relatively benign or complementary, precluded true communication and exchange. I longed to foster a greater mutual understanding between the two countries that I had called home.

In order to do so, however, I felt keenly the need to further educate myself. Most pressing, I had to improve my Japanese, and I worked hard to teach myself the language while I was in the country. I also made the decision to enroll in graduate school in order to learn more about Japanese history, as my earlier interest was now accompanied by a sense of purpose. Since beginning graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I have further improved my language abilities by taking fourth-year and classical Japanese, while re-immersing myself in the history of Japan. Over my first two years of graduate study, I have been able to develop research interests that speak to my concerns, and it is to pursue such interests that I am applying for the Fulbright IIE.

My research will attend to two aspects of Japanese history that I feel warrant attention to foster greater cross-cultural understanding. First, by focusing on the *hisabetsu burakumin*, the descendants of Japan's outcasts, I will promote a reconsideration of the idea of Japanese homogeneity by demonstrating the tyranny with which such a concept has been applied in Japan itself, for although unity was demanded in prewar Japan, the *hisabetsu burakumin* were not allowed to truly incorporate. It is important that Japanese and foreign audiences better understand the existence of minorities in Japan, and the struggles they have faced. It is my hope that my efforts in this regard will be embraced by the *buraku* community. Secondly, I hope encourage a fresh look at the topic of the militarization of prewar Japan. It is logical that Americans' views on Japan might be shaped by the war, as this was certainly the most intense period of interaction between our countries, but this too often has led to ideas of the Japanese as having a uniquely warlike culture. I hope that my study will help demystify prewar Japan by demonstrating how people motivated by reasons contrary to militarism could end up supporting the state during a desperate and destructive war. By addressing such contentious points in English, I hope to encourage the American audience to rethink common assumptions about Japan. Moreover, by engaging the academic community in Japan through conferences and conversation, I hope to provide an outside perspective, while benefiting from the guidance of Dr. Katō Yōko of Tokyo University, who has agreed to take on my project.