

Modern Environmental Governance and Local Knowledge: A Case Study of Taiwan's Colonial Forestry

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ABSTRACT

The past decade has witnessed surging interests in local knowledge among scholars and practitioners of environmental management. Immersing themselves in fieldwork and archives, scholars and practitioners have relentlessly tried to dig up or carve out some well-defined and locally confined knowledge in the hope of refining some “ecological wisdom” from it to better tackle today’s environmental crises. Yet, what is local knowledge? What is the local? Drawing on a growing body of literature on assemblage thinking and environmental governance, this essay suggests that scholars interested in local knowledge should treat the making of a government-centered and science-based environmental governing regime more seriously, meaning that they should pay close attention to how the regime erases, appropriates, and invents the local. The colonial forestry regime in Taiwan offers an excellent case to illustrate such. Beginning with a genealogical analysis of how modern forestry came into being in imperial Japan, this essay shows that by the late nineteenth century, forestry professionals in Japan had adopted the “mutualist” or *sōrikyōsei* principle to guide Japan’s forestry policies. That is to say, instead of monopolizing the benefits generated by forestry management, the government built mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship with the people and shared benefits with them. This mutualistic forest management soon found its way to Japan’s colonial forestry in Taiwan. Of critical importance is that the colonial forestry department on one hand designated a large portion of Taiwan’s forests as national forests, and on the other hand recruited “trustworthy and devoted” actors (i.e., capitalists from Japan), cultivated them, and collaborated with them in order to “normalize” Taiwan’s natural forests. Nevertheless, those who got entangled in what may be called environmental subjectification refused to subjugate to the colonial forestry regime, while those being excluded, mostly the so-called *hontōjin*, or the Taiwanese people,

who utilized forest resources according to old customs and conventions, conducted “everyday forms of resistance” to undermine the colonial government’s authority over national forests. In consequence, the colonial forestry department found that the cost of maintaining national forests skyrocketed, to the extent that it was next to impossible to practice mutualism that had for some time constituted the core of Japan’s imperial forestry. It was against this backdrop that the colonial forestry department in Taiwan began emphasizing the importance of local knowledge, particularly the ways in which the Taiwanese utilized broadleaf forests, and argued that Japan’s imperial forestry could actually benefit from such local knowledge. This essay shows that the emergence of the local concept and local knowledge in colonial forestry did not mean that foresters eventually discovered the local. Rather, the emergence resulted from the government’s deployment of power, and yet it also embodied unintended consequences which the power relations resulted in. While the emergence of the local had everything to do with the government-centered environmental subjectification, it also demonstrated how fragile and vulnerable the whole course could be. Altogether, this essay shows that if contemporary researchers refrain themselves from scrutinizing ways in which local knowledge and the government’s environment-governing regime entangled with each other, and study local knowledge as if it were essentially different from and incommensurable with the modern environmental regime, the approach may hardly move beyond what colonial foresters in Taiwan had done in the 1930s.

Keywords: Environmental Governance, Local Knowledge, Colonial Forestry, Japanese Empire