

Colonial Nature Governance: “Useful Plants Survey” in Taiwan

Szu-wei Tsai

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzed the Japanese botanical exploration in Taiwan from 1895 to the Colonial Government’s project of “Useful Plants Survey” in the 1910s. In addition to plant lists, floras, specimens, and other historical materials, this study also used the collection of correspondence of Miyabe Kingo at the Hokkaido University Archives.

Until the end of the 19th century, the development of Japanese botany was constrained by the West. This prompted Sapporo Agricultural College and Tokyo Imperial University to work respectively on regional research of new colonies. Tokyo Imperial University’s 1896 Taiwan Expedition was lackluster at best. Although Japan wanted to keep the survey results of Taiwan’s nature to herself, it failed due to inadequate research capabilities and technologies, inability to understand Taiwan’s natural world, and incapacity to govern.

In 1905, the Governor-General’s Office in Taiwan improved its past practices and launched the project of “Survey of Useful Plants of Formosa.” Survey proponents and participants included botanical researchers from Sapporo Agricultural College and Tokyo Imperial University, as well as bureaucrats from the Colonial Government. In essence, this elite group was the epitome of Japanese botany. The surveyors quickly went everywhere including the highest mountain in Taiwan, collected a large number of specimens from various locations, and published A List of Plants of Formosa to facilitate communication and inspection by local officials. At the same time, oversea specimen exchanges and book donations were conducted to show the governing ability of the Colonial Government.

The survey arguably shifted the long-standing, sole focus off Tokyo Imperial University with regards to Taiwan’s botanical surveys. Overall, the goal of the “Useful Plants Survey” was to study “all”, not just “useful”, plants in Taiwan. The Governor-General’s Office played a significant role in it, not merely to display the dominance of the

empire over its colony. This reflects the abstractness and complexity of the investigation of nature in relation to imperial governance. The “Useful Plants Survey” is the key to the localization of Taiwan’s plant research and it is also the cornerstone for the future development of academic research on Taiwan.

Keywords : Botanical Survey, Collector, Natural History, Nitobe Inazo, Kawakami Takiya